

World War II Croatian Legionaries

Croatian Troops under Axis Command 1941–45



Vladimir Brnardic • Illustrated by Viseslav Aralica

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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Dedication

To my family: Teodora, Helena, Lea, Lara, Dorotea and Teodor

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Artist's Note

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Abbreviations used in this text:

CAFL	Croatian Air Force Legion
CFL	Croatian Flak Legions
CNL	Croatian Naval Legion
I/, etc	1st, etc, Battalions of a numbered regiment
ISC	Independent State of Croatia
LMB	Light Motorized Battalion (Italian-Croatian Legion)
PLAY	Peoples' Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (formerly, Partisans)
RIR	Reinforced Infantry Regiment

WORLD WAR II CROATIAN LEGIONARIES

An unidentified *Oberfeldwebel* (equivalent to a staff sergeant or warrant officer 2nd Class) of 369th Infantry Division (Croatian), photographed at his ease. Note the national shield patch on the upper right sleeve of his German tunic, which is of the M1940 pattern with a *feldgrau* collar, though with dark green shoulder straps. On the left breast pocket he displays the General Assault Badge, Iron Cross 1st Class, and a Wound Badge. German Army national insignia are sewn on his German M1941 tropical field cap and above his right breast pocket. (HR HDA NL02000)



INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Eastern phase of World War II, from June 1941 to May 1945, Croatian 'legionaries' (that is, Croats willing to fight outside their homeland under German or Italian command) served in all branches of the Wehrmacht including the Waffen-SS, and in the Police. This book is concerned only with these troops who served under direct Axis command – not the Croatian Defence Force (*Hrvatsko domobranstvo*) or the Ustasha militia (*Ustaška vojnica*).¹

On 10 April 1941, just four days after Hitler invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the breakaway Nazi-puppet Independent State of Croatia (ISC) – *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH)* – was proclaimed. The new state's population was majority Croatian and Roman Catholic, but with large Serbian (Eastern Orthodox), Muslim, ethnic German and other minorities within its territory. Its new government, led by Ante Pavelić,

was strongly Catholic, nationalistic, anti-Serbian, anti-semitic and anti-Communist. Three months later the first Croatian legionary troops were enlisted for service with the Axis powers. The numbers of such troops raised in Croatia would increase during the war, finally totalling some 200,000; many were motivated to volunteer for ideological reasons or by propaganda, others were attracted by better conditions of service and unit *esprit de corps*, but still more were simply conscripted, or transferred from other units.

The units and formations known to have been composed of Croat volunteers under German command were the original Croatian Legion or 369th Reinforced Infantry Regiment, and its successor 369th *Vražja* ('Devil's') Division; 373rd *Tigar* ('Tiger') Div; 392nd *Plava* ('Blue') Div; the Croatian Air Force Legion (CAFL), including AA Flak units; and the Croatian Naval Legion (CNL). In the Waffen-SS, Croats served in the 13. Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS '*Handschar*' and the largely abortive 23. Waffen-Gebirgs Div der SS '*Kama*'. The German-Croatian Police included Police Volunteer Regiments (Croatian) 1–5; the Police Anti-Tank Company 'Croatia'

¹ For general information on the Croatian armed forces, including insignia charts, see *Men-at-Arms 282 Axis Forces in Yugoslavia 1941–45*.

Major Vladimir Ferenčina, Oberstleutnant Franjo Džal and Leutnant Dragutin Ivanić of the Croatian Air Force Legion on Taman airfield, March 1943, at the beginning of the fighter squadron's second tour on the Eastern Front. Since the defeat at Stalingrad morale had suffered; May 1943 would see the first of several defections to Soviet airfields, and the unit was temporarily withdrawn from the front until reinforced by new pilots fresh from Luftwaffe training in October 1943. In the background are a mechanic in black overalls, and an anti-aircraft (AA) team with a light machine gun on a tripod mount. (Mario Raguž Collection)



and 16th Tank Co; and the Gendarmerie Div 'Croatia'. Croats and other inhabitants of the ISC also volunteered to serve within many German units, but their precise numbers and personal records are now lost to history. Italian-sponsored units included the Italian-Croatian Legion or Light Motorized Battalion, its successor, the 2nd Croatian Legion, and the Voluntary Anti-Communist Militia (MVAC).

Many Croatian legionary elements proved themselves to be excellent fighting units, but some became notorious for atrocities against civilians, including mass killings.

LEGIONARY UNITS

When Germany launched its invasion of the Soviet Union in Operation 'Barbarossa' on 22 June 1941, Adolf Hitler called on his Axis allies to join the fight against Communism and, just two months after the formation of the ISC, this new member of the Axis made its first military commitment to its sponsor. The ISC's *Poglavnik* ('Leader'), Ante Pavelić, offered to commit Croatian land, air and naval forces 'as soon as possible', and on 2 July he invited Croats to volunteer to serve with the German Wehrmacht. It was decided that one regiment of infantry, two air units and one naval unit would be sent to the Eastern Front.

CROATIAN LEGION or 369th REINFORCED INFANTRY REGIMENT (CROATIAN)

Within two weeks around 5,000 men had volunteered, and from these 3,865 formed Croatia's first infantry regiment on 16 July 1941. The unit was termed in Croatian *Pojačana hrvatska 369. pješačka pukovnija*, and in German, 369. verstärktes Infanterie-Regiment (kroat.) – '369th Reinforced Infantry Regiment (Croatian)', or 369th RIR.

The regiment consisted of a headquarters and HQ company with signals, cavalry and pioneer (combat engineer) platoons; three infantry battalions each of four companies; a 13th mortar and 14th anti-tank company, as well as a supply and transport company. Each infantry battalion had a battalion HQ, three rifle companies and a machine-gun

company; the 3rd Bn's 11th Co was equipped with bicycles for reconnaissance. The regiment was designated as 'Reinforced' because of its attached artillery battalion, which was not normally an integral element of German regiments. This consisted of an HQ battery and three gun batteries with 4x M18 10.5cm howitzers each. In all, the regiment's transport consisted of 1,378 horses, 366 wagons, 207 bicycles, 22 motorcycles, but just one car and one truck.

Its first commander was Col Ivan Markulj, who was later replaced by Col Viktor Pavičić, while LtCol Marko Mesić commanded the attached artillery. Soon after the regiment's formation a training/depot battalion to process new recruits was organized and based in the town of Stockerau in Austria. On completion of training the regiment numbered 3,895 of all ranks, and formally joined the German Wehrmacht. Once fully mustered, between 21 and 24 July 1941 the 369th RIR moved to Kaufholz camp at Döllersheim near Vienna for combat training and to complete its equipment. Just a week later, on 31 July, the troops swore a joint oath of allegiance to the Führer, the *Poglavnik*, the German Reich and the ISC.

After three weeks' of basic platoon training and familiarization with German weapons and equipment, the regiment was transported by train through Hungary and Romania to Dongena in Soviet Bessarabia. From there, the 369th RIR set off on a 755km (482 mile) forced march across Ukraine to reach the front line, but there were already problems amongst the troops: 43 officers and NCOs, together with 144 soldiers, were sent back to Croatia on 30 September due to illness or for disciplinary reasons. Once in the front line, others were executed by firing squad after committing various military offences.

1941-42: the first winter

On 9 October 1941, in the front line near Kharkov, the 369th RIR joined the German Army's largely Austrian-raised 100th Jäger Div, which was part of Seventeenth Army in Army Group South. Initially, as part of its training and familiarization with Russian conditions and German operational procedures, it was dispersed in sub-units throughout the division, and as the Germans headed for Kharkov most of these were soon in action. One of their first successes occurred on 11 October, when they downed a Soviet light bomber with machine-gun fire, although they also suffered



Live fire practice by men of the 369th RIR with a 5cm GrW36 light mortar: note the Croatian shield painted on the right side of the helmets. While the Croatians may not have received the full numbers, the regulation German scale of crew-served weapons in rifle companies was one 5cm mortar per platoon, and 3x MG34 section machine guns. The battalion MG companies had 12x MG34s with sustained-fire tripod mounts, and 6x 8cm GrW34 mortars. The regimental infantry gun company (absent from the 369th RIR) had 6x FH18 10.5cm howitzers, and the anti-tank company 12x 3.7cm PaK35/36 guns. (HR HDA 1561, 00440).

Leutnant Osotjić and Hauptmann Prišlin of 369th RIR's artillery battalion range in a target on the Eastern front in late 1942. The Croatian shield patch is worn on the left sleeve, but the German Army's eagle decal is retained on the left side of the helmet. This photo appeared in the magazine *'Die Wehrmacht'* on 3 February 1943.



A messenger of the 369th RIR on a Russian pony, photographed at Vasilyvka on 15 April 1942; at this date the elements of the regiment were still dispersed among German units of 100. Jäger-Division, with which they had seen heavy fighting during winter 1941–42. He is wearing an ISC *Domobranstvo* field cap, and his helmet hangs from the saddle; note the Croatian shield worn on the left sleeve – compare with Plate A2. He is armed with an MP38 or MP40 sub-machine gun, and has a stick grenade tucked into his belt. (HR HDA 1561/00423)



Part of a nine-man delegation from the 369th RIR which returned to Croatia on 29 May 1942 to be presented to the Minister of Defence, Marshal Slavko Kvaternik, after the second battle of Kharkov. Some of them appear to have received new uniforms for the occasion. Under magnification the unit number '369' is visible on their shoulder straps, and this is the only photographic record of its being worn. At left, a *Hauptfeldwebel* (company sergeant-major) is identified by the double 'piston rings' of silver *Tresse* on his cuffs; note too the internal pocket pleats of the *Domobranstvo*-style tunic. All have the Croatian Legion badge pinned on their left tunic pocket, and presumably wear the shield patch on their left sleeves. (HR HAD 1561/NL04206)



their first losses, and Lt Edvard Basarac, commanding the 11th (Bicycle Recce) Co, became the first legionary to be awarded the Iron Cross. As the Red Army winter counter-offensive of November 1941 recaptured Rostov, the various dispersed elements of the regiment were marched south to the front line on the Mius river. Lacking winter clothing, in temperatures dropping as low as -18°C, the 369th dug in and continued their training despite the onset of a terrible winter.

In mid-January 1942, 100th Jäger Div was deployed to Izyum on the Donets river to help repel a Soviet breakthrough in the Barvekovo-Lozovaya sector. At the battle of Krivorozhye, in temperatures of -43° C, I/369th

RIR suffered heavy losses, but despite fierce fighting on the Samara river the division held its line throughout the winter. By April 1942 sufficient reinforcements were arriving from the depot, and in mid-May the whole regiment was assembled to fight as a unified force under Col Markulj in Operation 'Fridricus' (also known as the second battle of Kharkov), 17–28 May 1942; subsequently Col Markulj, Lt Eduard Bakarec and six other officers were awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class. A report dated 21 June 1942 notes that the Legion then comprised 65 officers, 7 military clerks, 342 NCOs, and 2,284 soldiers, with 1,492 horses.

1942: towards Stalingrad

Colonel Markulj was sent home for health reasons and was temporarily replaced by the artillery's LtCol Mesić until 26 June, when Col Viktor Pavičić took formal command. As he took over, the regiment was already engaged in Operation 'Case Blue' (renamed 'Brunswick' on 30 June), which had started on 18 June and lasted until 17 July. During the last ten days of this operation the 369th RIR marched more than 270km (168 miles). As 100th Jäger Div pushed on towards the Don river as part of LI Corps of Sixth Army, the regiment was involved in heavy close-quarter fighting at the Prolyet Kultura collective farm near Selivanovo during the German assault of 25–27 July, and in repelling the subsequent Soviet counter-attack. After participating in mopping-up operations along the Don the division rested briefly in September, and the 369th RIR was re-organized after receiving some reinforcements for the advance to the



Volga. On 24 September 1942, during a visit to Sixth Army headquarters at Golubinskaya outside Stalingrad, Ante Pavelić decorated and promoted soldiers of the regiment.

Two days later 100th Jäger Div was committed to the battle, and the 369th RIR was the only non-German unit to participate in the attack on the city. Engaged in fierce fighting for the notorious Red October Factory and the Mamayev Kurgan, by 13 October the infantry component of the regiment was reduced to one weak battalion and two depleted independent companies, totalling just 983 men including its reinforcements from Stokerau. The Croats fought on, attached to the German 212th Inf Regt from 79th Inf Div, at terrible cost; by the end of November 1942 there were just five officers, nine NCOs and 110 infantry soldiers left fit for action (although, in addition, the artillery was scattered between several German units). In the intolerably harsh conditions, the German High Command credited the regiment with maintaining a 'proper and military bearing'. On 17 December 1942 the Volga river froze sufficiently to allow the Soviets to open another front, and on 16 January 1943 the Red Army launched a fierce attack from three sides of the Croatian positions. The last 90 beleaguered men of the 369th – all suffering from extreme cold, hunger, fatigue and shortage of ammunition – struggled desperately to hold a perimeter reduced to about 200 yards. When their supplies were almost completely exhausted, Col Viktor Pavičić disappeared. He reportedly left a resignation letter to the divisional commander, GenLt Werner Sanne, in which he recommended LtCol Mesić as his successor. Sanne officially reported that Pavičić had deserted, but Sgt Erwin Jurić claimed that Pavičić had received written orders signed by Sanne to leave Stalingrad by air on 15 January.

The last official report from 21 January 1943 counted 443 Croatian infantry and 444 artillerymen in Stalingrad. Two days later 18 wounded were flown out; these were the last men of the 369th to leave the besieged city. A handful of surviving Croatian legionaries led by LtCol Marko Mesić surrendered to the Red Army on 31 January at the Soviet Air Force Academy amidst the smouldering ruins. The Croatian 369th Reinforced Infantry Regiment had ceased to exist. During its service on the Eastern Front around 6,000 men had served in its ranks; of these, 886 officers and soldiers died, plus 935 listed as missing, in addition to thousands wounded.

Officers of the 369th RIR at an award ceremony at Golubinskaya on the Don on 24 September 1942, during the visit of the Croatian *Poglavnik* Ante Pavelić to the Eastern Front only days before the unit was committed to the battle for Stalingrad. (From left to right:) *Maj* Tomislav Brajković, *Olt* Blago Zlomislić, *Hptm* Vasilije Maljgin, and an unidentified German officer. Brajković, who already wears the Large Silver Medal of Leader Ante Pavelić for Courage (*Velika srebrna kolajna Poglavnika Ante Pavelića za hrabrost*), and probably ribbons of the Military Order of the Iron Trefoil, seems to have been decorated with the Iron Cross 2nd Class that day. The other two Croatian officers have apparently attached the crosses of previous 2nd Class awards to the buttonhole ribbons for this occasion. Zlomislić and Maljgin both wear the Croatian Legion badge on the left side of their M1938 officers' field caps. They also display the Iron Cross 1st Class; the Croatian Military Orders of the Iron Trefoil 4th Class (*Hrvatski željezni trolist IV reda*) and the 4th Class with Oakleaves (... *trolist IV reda s hrastovim grančicama*); and Wound Badges. Zlomislić also wears the German Infantry Assault Badge. (Private collection)



NCOs and men of the LMB with their Christmas tree during training at Riva del Garde, Italy, in late December 1941. They all sport the unit's aluminium national shield on the upper left sleeve, but (unlike their officers) they still wear ISC *Domobran* (Defence Force) bronze insignia on their Italian field caps. In the central foreground are two NCOs wearing red MVSN rank insignia on their cuffs: a *camice nera scelta* (lance corporal) on the left, and a *vice capo squadra* (junior corporal) on the right. (HR HDA 1681/33)

ITALIAN-CROATIAN LEGION or LIGHT MOTORIZED BATTALION

In July 1941 the Italian High Command requested that a Croat Legion – if only a small, token unit – be formed for service in the Italian army on the Eastern Front. Italy had supported and sheltered the Croat *Ustasha* ('rebels') against the Yugoslavian monarchy in the 1930s, and had designs on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. Although not pleased with this request, Pavelić's regime decided not to offend its now rather unloved ally. On 26 July 1941 the Croatian Army Command ordered the formation of the *Lako Prevozni Zdrug* ('Light Motorized Battalion', LMB). Most of the personnel came from a battalion of volunteers who had been intended as reinforcements for the 369th RIR. This unit, affiliated to the Fascist Party's 'Blackshirt' *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN), had a

strength of 45 officers, 70 NCOs and 1,100 troops (1,215 in total). It comprised three rifle companies, an MG company, a mortar company with 81mm tubes, a replacement company, and an artillery battery with 65mm guns. Commanded by LtCol Egon Žitnik, the battalion was posted to Varaždin (Warasdin) in northern Croatia for training.

Intended as an expeditionary unit, the LMB nevertheless had to wait around in that city for longer than expected due to Italian administrative failures. Consequently, they were actually deployed in sweeping the nearby Kordun, Banija and Bosanska Krajina regions of Croatia for the small groups of ex-Yugoslavian soldiers and guerrillas who were hiding in the forests and fighting against the fledgling ISC.

On 17 December 1941 the Italians finally ordered the unit to Italy, where they received their new weapons and transport at Riva del Garda, followed by three months' of intensive training. When this was completed the battalion was inspected by Gen Ugo Cavallerio of the Italian Headquarters Staff and the Croatian Minister of Defence, Marshal

Officers of the LMB at Riva del Garde on 19 February 1942, during the ceremony at which they swore their oath of allegiance. Unlike the NCOs and men, they wear MVSN *fasces* badges on their collars and wreathed *fasces* on their 'bustina' field caps (see Plate D3). Identifiable by their gold cuff insignia are (left to right, foreground) three *centuriones* (captains) and a *capomanipolo* (lieutenant). (HR HAD 1681/087)



Slavko Kvaternik. After the formal presentation of the LMB's battle flag the troops took their rather complicated oath of allegiance, jointly to Italy, Croatia, Mussolini, the King of Italy and the *Poglavnik*.

The LMB arrived on the Eastern Front to join what would now be designated the Italian Eighth Army on 16 April 1942, near the Ukrainian town of Khartsyzk, where they were attached to the cavalry formation *3o Divisione Celere 'Principe Amadeo Duca D'Aosta'*. There they received the remainder of their equipment and vehicles: three staff cars, six motorcycles and 44 Autocarro Leggero SPA 38R lorries. The battalion was also allocated 108 small but hardy Bosnian horses, which would prove invaluable in the harsh conditions of the Eastern Front. On 11 May the battalion fought its first engagement, a small action to relieve the 63rd Blackshirt Bn 'Tagliamento', in which it lost five casualties. Over the following weeks the LMB fought around the towns of Rasipnoye, Greko-Timofeyevka, Mihaylovka and Veselyi, until, on 11 July 1942, its division was transferred to the Italian XXXV Corps.

The very next day, together with a Blackshirt battle-group, the LMB fought its way 30km (18.6 miles) into Soviet lines. Battles followed around Vladimirovka, Krasnaya Polyana and Fyodorovka, and on 28 July the battalion crossed the Donetsk river at Lubanskoye. However, on 20 August the Soviets counter-attacked at Serafimovich on the Don. In fierce fighting the Croatian unit managed to hold its positions, inflicting heavy casualties and capturing 46 prisoners. In the fighting from 24 to 31 August the LMB lost 27 dead and 90 wounded. In recognition, the battalion was awarded the 'Sul Campo' (Italian field service) decoration by the commander of XXXV Corps.

The end came – as it did to most of the Italian Eighth Army – on the Chir river line in December 1942, when the battalion was holding Hills 210 and 168 near Meshkov. On 19 December they were surrounded by a massive Soviet attack during the Red Army's Operation 'Little Saturn', the outer pincer of the northern phase of the counter-offensive against Stalingrad. Fighting continued for two days, but on the 21st the ammunition ran out and the battalion was overrun. There were no survivors.

2nd CROATIAN LEGION

After the destruction of the Light Motorized Battalion in December 1942 the Croatian Armed Forces Ministry did not intend to replace it, but eventually gave way to Italian pressure to do so. A new *Druga Hrvatska Legija* ('2nd Croatian Legion') came into existence in May 1943, just four months before Mussolini's Italian regime collapsed. The plan was to create a force with a strength of 3,830 all ranks, organized into an infantry regiment of two battalions, a mortar company, an artillery battalion of two batteries, a pioneer detachment, and a depot battalion. Once again, the Italians provided uniforms, arms and equipment.



Capomanipolo (Lt) Zvonimir Parac (standing, centre – see also Plate D1 & D3), with soldiers of the LMB's HQ company on the Eastern Front in late summer 1942. They are armed with a mixture of Italian and captured Soviet weaponry: Parac carries a PPSH-41 sub-machine gun, and the vice capo squadra (kneeling, right) a Tokarev SVT-40 semi-automatic rifle. All ranks now wear fasces badges on their *bustina* caps, and the soldier sitting in the middle has an officer's cap. All three in the front row display medal ribbons, and the central man the Ante Pavelić Medal for Courage in either Silver or Bronze. He and the man standing on the right wear the Croatian-Italian Legion badge on the left breast, but the soldier kneeling on the right wears the simpler Croatian Legion lime-leaf badge on the side of his cap. (HR HAD 1681/165)

Leutnant Cvitan Galić (left), with 28 confirmed and 3 probable victories the CAFL's leading ace during its first combat tour, poses with Oberfeldwebel Stjepan Radić on a Messerschmitt Bf109E of 10th Reinforced Fighter Sqn (15/JG52) in 1942. Galić would be killed on the ground during an Allied raid on a Croatian airfield on 6 April 1944. Radić scored his fifth victory on 29 August 1942, but fell victim to flak later in that mission. The CAFL badge is painted below the cockpit, and the nose cowling is painted in the yellow adopted by the Luftwaffe in Russia for quick recognition at a distance. (Mario Raguž Collection)



Upon their return from their first combat tour the CAFL legionaries were welcomed as heroes, and were decorated at a ceremony in Zagreb on 23 December 1942. Here the fighter commander Obstdt Franjo Džal, who had 16 confirmed kills, wears the CAFL winged badge on his right breast pocket below the Luftwaffe wings. The medal attached to his top buttonhole is the *Hrvatski željezni trolist III reda s hrastovim grančicama* ('Croatian Order of the Iron Trefoil 3rd Class with Oakleaves'). Above his left pocket are the *Frontflug-Spange für Jäger* ('Front Line Missions Clasp for Fighters'), and the *Velika srebrna kolajna Poglavnika Ante Pavelića za hrabrost* ('Grand Silver Medal of the Leader Ante Pavelić for Courage'). On that pocket are the Iron Cross 1st Class, a Wound Badge, the Luftwaffe Pilot's Badge and, just visible, the similar ISC Air Force equivalent. (Mario Raguž Collection)

The enlisted Croatians were sent to Gorizia and then to Riva del Garda, Conegliano and Laives for training from 22 June 1943 onwards, but this ceased when Italy surrendered on 9 September. The Legion's commander, Col Đuro Novak, ordered a return home, but during the chaotic period following Italian capitulation the Legion was taken under German command. It was deployed for guard duty along a 120km (75 mile) section of the Tarvisio–Gemona–Udine railway, which was coming under repeated attacks by Italian and Slovene partisans. The 2nd Legion performed this task until the beginning of December 1943, when it was moved to the Stockerau depot in Austria to complete its training. It was then disbanded by the Germans and its men used to reinforce existing German-Croatian formations, especially the 373rd 'Tiger' Div (see below), and various mountain and rifle brigades of the Croatian *Domobranstvo*.



CROATIAN AIR FORCE LEGION

The *Hrvatska Zrakoplovna Legija* (Croatian Air Force Legion, CAFL) was formed on 1 July 1941 and composed entirely of volunteers, many of whom had previously served in the Royal Yugoslavian Air Force during the Nazi invasion of April 1941. Two weeks later, they officially became the 4. *Mješovita Zrakoplovna Pukovnija* (4th Mixed Air

Force Regt) under the command of Col Ivan Mrak. This was divided into 4. *Zrakoplovna Lovačka Skupina* (4th AF Fighter Group) of 15 officers, 93 NCOs and 95 men under Maj Franjo Džal, and 5. *Bombaška Skupina* (5th Bomber Group) with 37 officers, 115 NCOs and five men under Maj Vjekoslav Vičević. A few days later a total of 360 officers, NCOs and men were sent to Germany for training, the fighter unit to Fürth and the bomber group to Greifswald.



An Oberfeldwebel of the CAFL's 5th Bomber Wing preparing for a combat mission in a Dornier Do17Z. Note the CAFL 'wings' patch worn on his right sleeve, and Croatian Air Force and CAFL badges both worn below the Luftwaffe eagle on his Luftwaffe uniform.

The 4th Fighter Group was initially composed of the Croatian 10th Fighter Squadron, which was sent to the Eastern Front in October 1941, followed by 11th Fighter Sqn in December. Together they formed 15. Staffel, attached to 3. Gruppe, of the Luftwaffe's Jagdgeschwader 52 (15/JG52) in Luftflotte 4, supporting Army Group South. Equipped with the Messerschmitt Bf109E until July 1942, they then received the Bf109G-2, and in 1943 the G-4 and G-6 variants. The fighter unit served two combat tours: from 9 October 1941 to 15 November 1942, and from 12 February 1943 until 1 November 1944. However, due to a shortage of aircraft the Croats were reorganized as early as January 1942 into the *Ojačano 10. Lovačko Jato* (Reinforced 10th Fighter Sqn), and again in April 1943, this time as *Lovačka Skupina Džal* (Džal's Fighter Group), still designated by the Germans as 15. Staffel of JG52. Throughout its time in Russia the unit racked up more than 5,000 sorties, 299 confirmed aerial victories plus 42 to 46 'probables', and 5 Soviet aircraft destroyed on the ground. In all, 21 Croatian pilots gained 'ace' status with five or more confirmed kills; the most successful were Cpts Mato Dukovac (*Staffelkapitän* of 15/JG52 from October 1943) with 44 confirmed and 1 probable, and Cvitan Galić with 38 confirmed and 5 probables.

The 5th Bomber Wing (later commanded by Maj Vladimir Graovac) was composed of 12th and 13th Bomber Sqns flying the Dornier Do17Z. The unit arrived on the Eastern Front in October 1941; it served as 10. Staffel of Kampfgeschwader 3 (10/KG3) on the Moscow front until February 1942, and as 15. (kroat.) Staffel of KG53 on the Leningrad front from June to October 1942. It then returned to Croatia, after flying a total of 1,332 combat missions.

The CAFL was disbanded on 21 July 1944, but was re-formed as the *Hrvatska Zrakoplovna Izobrazbena Skupina* (Croatian Air Force Training Group) under the command of Col Džal. It still comprised two units: 15/JG52 on the Eastern Front under Lt Đuro Švarc, and the newly-formed 1. (kroat.) Stukastaffel/SG9 (1st Croatian Dive-Bomber Sqn/Ground-Attack Group 9).

Celebrating the return of an aircrew from the 1,000th combat mission flown by the CAFL 5th Bomber Wing, on 16 September 1942. At far right, note the Feldwebel's rank patch on the sleeve of the winter flying suit. Their silver-piped *Fliegermützen* caps identify the other three as officers.



Marshal Kvaternik reviews men of the CNL on their departure for Varna on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria. They are dressed in Royal Yugoslavian Navy uniforms, but with grey-painted Czechoslovakian-pattern M1934 helmets; the belt equipment is in brown leather. The three yellow chevrons just visible on the sleeve of the central sailor mark him as a *Matrosenhauptgefreiter* (seaman 1st class) with 4½ years' service; the steering wheel patch above them identifies the motor transport department. (Mirko Meter Collection)



The latter, equipped with six Junkers Ju87R-2 aircraft, was deployed for training near the front line in East Prussia, but was withdrawn and disbanded after the defection to the Soviets of the leading Croatian fighter ace, Mato Dukovac, on 20 September 1944. The remaining personnel were sent for infantry training and took part in fighting against the Red Army until they had retreated to Frankfurt-an-der-Oder. It was March 1945 before they saw Croatia again.

A group of Croatian aircraft mechanics and technicians, who had conducted their training in France and Bohemia-Moravia in 1942, were also enlisted into the Luftwaffe, serving as foreign volunteers until the end of the war.

The 17th *Zrakoplovna Satnija* (Air Force Company), which was attached to Feldregiment der Luftwaffe 4, was made up of Croatian volunteers who had completed the Fallschirmjäger (paratroop) course at Wiener Neustadt in 1942. The company, at first led by Capt Martin Pflug and later by Lt Vladimir Panjan, fought with FR der L 4 on the northern sector of the Eastern Front, as part of Luftwaffe-Division Meindl, from 17 June 1942. It was disbanded in 1943, and its survivors returned to Croatia.

CROATIAN NAVAL LEGION

Poglavnik Pavelić's call for volunteers in July 1941 was answered by sufficient former Royal Yugoslavian Navy personnel to form a unit with a total strength of 343, comprising 23 officers, 220 petty officers and 100 ratings. Italy had already vetoed the formation of a separate Croatian national navy in the Adriatic Sea, but the ISC government hoped that this small force, serving as part of the German Kriegsmarine on the Eastern Front, would gain valuable experience and eventually form the nucleus of a Croatian Navy to patrol its own national waters. The unit's official title was *Hrvatski Pomorski Sklop – Crno More* ('Croatian Naval Battalion – Black Sea'), but it was usually known simply as the *Hrvatska Pomorska Legija*, and immediately became part of the German Navy on 3 July 1941. The CNL's first commander was *Fregattenkapitän* (Cdr), later *Kapitän zur See* (Capt) Andro Vrkljan, who was subsequently replaced by Capt Stjepan Rumenović.



Sailors of the Croatian Naval Legion in battle order, and now with German helmets, manning a 20mm Oerlikon automatic anti-aircraft cannon.

This Naval Legion was sent for training to Varna on the Bulgarian coast of the Black Sea. Upon arrival on 17 July 1941, the personnel received their equipment and commenced the additional training required for their role: marine infantry weapons and drill, signalling, small-boat handling, and learning the German language. Training was completed on 22 September, and on that date the Legion departed for occupied Soviet territory. Upon arrival on 30 September it was officially designated as 23. Minensuch-Flottille (23rd Minesweeper Flotilla). The craft initially assigned were mostly motorized sailing boats and converted fishing smacks, which were expected to be replaced by better vessels later. At the end of September 1941 the Legion was stationed in the small Ukrainian port of Geniscek, which was fortified shortly afterwards, and the Legion began patrols both onshore and along the coast.



Three officers of the Croatian Naval Legion off duty in a Black Sea port in 1944. (Left to right:) *Oberleutnant zur See* (lieutenant) Božidar Mažuranić, commander of sub-hunter UJ-2310; *Olt z S* Stanko Stilinović, commanding UJ-2304; and *Lt z S* (ensign) Anton Karković, commanding UJ-2303. Note the leather trousers – see Plate C2. (Private collection)



Detail from photo of honour guard parading on the return of the Croatian Naval Legion to Zagreb on 5 May 1944. The headgear is the Kriegsmarine sailors' cap; at far right, a seaman 1st class sports the German *Krimschild* Crimea campaign badge above his two yellow chevrons. (Private collection)

A report from this period indicated that the Croatian sailors were eager to do battle – a wish that was granted when the Soviets mounted an attack on Geniscek at the end of 1941. With the aid of the Luftwaffe, the small German garrison, together with the CNL and a squadron of Romanian cavalry, were able to repel them. By mid-April 1942 the winter ice had almost disappeared; the Legion was ordered to lay defensive mines around the harbour entrance, but during this operation a catastrophic accident destroyed two craft and killed 25 Croatians. On 25 May 1942 the Croatian flotilla sailed out of Geniscek, and by August it was based at Mariapol and equipped with 31 *Motorfischkuter* (MFK – motorized fishing vessels) and 35 other motor boats. With the addition of smaller craft and a captured Soviet vessel, renamed *Tovaris* and designated as the Legion's flagship, the flotilla comprised 130 vessels. The Croatian crews were augmented with 200 German sailors and about 200 Ukrainian volunteers, who were mostly deserters from the Soviet forces.

Just prior to New Year's Eve 1942 the legionaries handed over their vessels to new crews, and returned to Croatia for well-deserved rest and recuperation.

After further training in Germany they returned to Varna in mid-1943, where they were allocated 12 new 100-ton submarine-chasers numbered UJ2301– UJ2311 plus UJ2314, and the Legion was officially designated Unterseebootsjäger-Flotille 23. Their final score was three Soviet submarines destroyed and a few damaged, together with 12 aircraft shot down.

In March 1943 a Croatian volunteer coastal artillery unit, consisting of two batteries, was attached to the Legion, bringing the total manpower above 1,000 men. When Italy capitulated that September its veto over a Croatian Navy became void, so the Legion was ordered to return home. Starting in October 1943, the move was conducted in four phases with the final group leaving the Black Sea on 21 May 1944. Initially based in Trieste, the Legion was soon broken up: some men were assigned to Kriegsmarine ships serving in the Adriatic, but the majority could finally report for duty as the new Navy of the ISC. The coastal artillery batteries remained part of the Kriegsmarine, being stationed at Split from February 1944.

CROATIAN ANTI-AIRCRAFT LEGIONS

In early 1943 a group of Croatians who had volunteered for service with the German military were formed into an anti-aircraft ('Flak') unit of the Luftwaffe, known as the *Hrvatska PZ Legija* (Croatian Anti-Aircraft Legion). Numbering 350 gunners and some 3,000 support troops commanded by Maj Srnc, they first went to Germany for training, and then served on the Eastern Front in the Ukraine until Crimea fell to the Soviets in May 1944. Most then returned to Croatia via Poland (along with 15/JG52), thereafter remaining in Zagreb until the end of the war. The remainder were deployed to Luftwaffe Flak batteries in VI and VII Air Districts, defending the areas around Münster and Munich against Allied bombers until they too returned to Croatia in late 1944.



A second volunteer Croatian anti-aircraft unit of the Luftwaffe was formed in late 1943 in Germany. After training at Auxerre and Bordeaux in France as well as in Germany, this became part of the German Home Defence AA as 7/s. Flakabteilung 463-(0) of 22. Flak-Division. They remained in Germany until the end of the war, defending cities including Munich, Frankfurt-am-Main and Fürth.

VOLUNTEER ANTI-COMMUNIST MILITIA

The *Milizia Volontaria Anti Comunista* (MVAC) was an auxiliary anti-partisan organization for the Italian Army, composed of local Croats and Serbs from Italian-occupied parts of Dalmatia. Between summer 1942 and spring 1943 the Italians created the MVAC 'Zara' unit, affiliated to their *158o Divisione* of that name, in the Croatian port today named Zadar. Also known as the *Bande Anticomuniste* (BAC), it had a total strength of about 1,500 officers and men organized in eight companies of 100–250 men each; of these, two (4th & 5th) were Serbian and the rest Croatian. An extra company was later raised by the Italian Navy with Serbs and Italians from Šibenik, and designated the *BAC della Marina*. All the officers were active or reserve officers of the Italian Army, mostly from around Zadar, while the NCOs were former NCOs of the Royal Yugoslavian Army. In recognition of the religious differences between the main national groups, in March 1943 the Serbian companies were reorganized into the *XXII Battaglione d'Assalto Greco-Ortodosso* and the Croatian companies as *XX Battaglione d'Assalto Cattolico* (respectively, '22nd Greek-Orthodox' and '20th Catholic' Assault Battalions).

The MVAC joined regular Italian Army units in anti-partisan operations in Dalmatia, usually being held in reserve to carry out reprisals; these included massacres, and the looting and burning of villages. After the Italian capitulation in September 1943 the MVAC found themselves facing the revenge of the Partisans. Part of the 20th Bn took refuge in Zadar under German protection, and were

A gunner of the Croatian Anti-Aircraft Legions loading an 8.8cm FlaK37 or FlaK41 heavy AA gun; and the Croatian crew of a quad 2cm FlaK38. (Private collection)

Kanonier Pero Braica was a gunner in 3rd Battery/1st AA Garrison Detachment at Bogenhausen near Munich. Under magnification, the Croatian shield patch on the right sleeve of his *Fliegerbluse* seems to show a pale squared backing rather than being cut to shape. (Mario Raguz Collection)



later transferred to Italy; others hid in the forests and became the nucleus of VII Ustasha Active Bde of the ISC internal security troops, while members of 22nd Bn joined the Chetnik '*Dinar*' Division led by an Orthodox priest, Momčilo Đujić.

LEGIONARY DIVISIONS

369th (CROATIAN) INFANTRY DIVISION

After the prowess displayed by the Croatian soldiers of the ill-fated 369th RIR, the Wehrmacht had decided even before that unit's annihilation at Stalingrad to raise a complete Croatian legionary division. From August 1942 the regiment's depot battalion at Stockerau and its recuperated wounded were used as the nucleus for a new formation. By December about 1,000 veterans of 369th RIR had been assembled, who were joined by new volunteers from Croatia. The division's commander, *GenLt* Fritz Neidholt, and most of its officer and NCO cadres were German. In honour of the fallen of 369th RIR the new formation subsequently received the title 369. (Kroatische) Infanterie-Division. However, its Croatian members adopted the nickname of *Vražja* ('Devil's') Division, harking back to the 42nd Croatian Div of the World War I Austro-Hungarian Army; its German component referred to it as the '*Schachbrett*' Division ('chessboard', after the Croatian patch worn on the sleeve).

Numbering 14,000 troops, the division was organized into two infantry regiments – 369. & 370. Kroatisches Infanterie-Grenadier Regts – each consisting of three battalions with three grenadier companies and a machine-gun company, with a regimental anti-tank Panzerjäger company and a mortar company. Each regiment also had a regimental headquarters staff and its associated HQ company (Stabskompanie), with signals, pioneer and cavalry reconnaissance platoons. The divisional 369th Croatian Artillery Regt had two battalions each with three batteries, and one heavy battalion of two batteries. The supporting units were numbered 369: a battalion each of pioneers, signallers, reconnaissance troops and Panzerjäger, together with a supply column, a maintenance company, three administration companies, a medical company, a veterinary company, and detachments of military police and the field postal service.

By December 1942, the activities of Tito's Communist Partisans prompted the German High Command to deploy the division in the Balkans rather than on the hard-pressed Eastern Front as originally intended. The lead elements of the 370th Regt started to move to Croatia by rail on 18 December, and the division suffered its first casualties when the train carrying the reconnaissance battalion was ambushed near Pračno, south of Sisak, on 5 January 1943. A mine derailed the train which was then taken under fire, killing 11 soldiers and a member of the train crew.

Operation 'White', February–March 1943

The 369th Div's first major combat operation was as part of Operation 'White' in northern Bosnia (aka the battle of the Neretva, or the Fourth Axis Offensive). In the first phase the division took Cazin in early February 1943, before advancing from 25 February in the second phase from Cazin to the Sisak-Kostajnica area. It then fought its way south-east to Prijedor, and south towards Bosanski Petrovac and Ključ, where it



joined up with 7th SS-Volunteer Mountain Div *'Prinz Eugen'*. The 369th was next active west of Ribinik and Mlinište, followed by actions in the area around Glamoč in Malovan. In early March they fought in the Duvno, Ščit, Prozor, Rama and Jablanica areas, as the Axis forces attempted to drive the Partisans up against the Neretva river so that they could finally be destroyed by a direct assault in superior numbers. However, the Partisans escaped the trap by fighting their way out through Italian and Serbian Chetnik forces. After this *'Unternehmen Weiss'*, the 369th Div was assigned an operational area running from the Sava river in the north to the Croatian Adriatic coast in the south, and from the city of Karlovac in the west to the Croatian-Serbian border on the Drina river in the east.

Operation 'Black', May-June 1943

Their next major operation was *'Unternehmen Schwarz'* (Operation 'Black', aka the battle of the Sutjeska, or the Fifth Axis Offensive), which lasted from 15 May to 16 June 1943. Apart from their reconnaissance battalion, the division deployed to the area of Foča, Ustikolina and Goražde, as well as across the Drina river in the Sandjak, to prevent Partisan forces from falling back into Serbia. The 369th Div attacked north-west of Balinovac and Rataj, forcing the Partisans to adjust their line of withdrawal towards the Sutjeska river valley. During the final phase of the operation the division formed part of the encircling Axis force on the northern slopes of the Zelengora mountains, and was engaged by withdrawing Partisan forces close to the town of Balinovac on 12 June. After three days of repeated Partisan assaults, during which both sides suffered heavy casualties, Tito's 1st Proletarian Bde finally broke out through the

A group of soldiers from 369th 'Devil's' Division during *Unternehmen Schwarz* (Operation 'Black', the battle of the Sutjeska river) in May 1943. The Croatian shield was now worn on the right sleeve, reversing the practice of the previous 369th Regiment. Because of the rain all except the senior ranker in the centre wear the splinter-camouflage *Zeltbahn* tent-section as a poncho. The section leader's status is indicated by his binoculars and MP40 sub-machine gun, but he is below the rank of *Unterfeldwebel*. (HR HDA NL01875)



A group of officers from 369th Div during Operation 'Black' against Tito's Partisans, May 1943. Three seem to have leather or rubberized coats and one wears a *Zeltbahn*. Three different models of field cap are visible here: the 'officers' old style' at left, the M1938 side cap, and the peaked Croatian *Domobranstvo* type. Three of these officers carry MP40 sub-machine guns. (HR HDA NL01885)

division's positions, followed by other Partisan units. The Croatian 369th Regt was badly mauled, losing the entire 3rd Company of its 1st Battalion.

Following Operation 'Black', a powerful Partisan battle-group penetrated deep into eastern Bosnia, destroying Croatian Ustasha garrisons in Vlasenica, Srebrenica, Olovo, Kladanj and Zvornik. Together with the SS Div '*Prinz Eugen*', the 369th Div was tasked with recapturing these towns. In early July the division fought a series of actions, especially around Zvornik in the north-east of its area of operations, which centred on Sarajevo.

The aftermath of Italian capitulation

After Italy capitulated on 8 September 1943 the 369th Div participated in the subsequent major operations alongside 373rd Croatian Inf Div, SS Div '*Prinz Eugen*' and other Croatian and German troops, which began with the disarmament of Italian garrisons in Dalmatia and Herzegovina. The 369th and '*Prinz Eugen*' accepted the surrender of the Italian garrison in Mostar, but in the meantime Partisan forces took other towns in Bosnia to threaten the Axis rear. On 29 September the Partisans attacked Tuzla, an important garrison held by 369th Div and ISC *Domobranstvo* units, which fell after four days of street fighting. Battle-Group Fischer (the bulk of the 369th Inf Regt, reinforced with artillery, elements of the 187th Reserve Div, and *Domobranstvo* units) fought to defend Doboj, and then attempted to recapture Tuzla alongside elements of LXIX Corps from Brčko. In early October, III/370th Regt in Višegrad came under ferocious assault by a strong Chetnik force from Serbia. Driving the Croats out of Višegrad, the Chetniks took Rogatica on 13 October, but after a week their brief bout of activity against

German forces ceased. The 369th Div recaptured Tuzla on 11 November.

When the division had returned to its homeland desertions had begun, prompted by news of Axis defeats in North Africa, at Stalingrad and elsewhere on the Eastern Front; by Partisan propaganda and infiltration; and by the efforts of the Croatian Peasants' Party. The rate of desertions steadily increased, especially after the Italian surrender. Nevertheless, after a period of recuperation and rebuilding, the 369th Div – now forming part of V SS Mountain Corps – engaged the Partisans in early December 1943 in the area around Travnik and Visoko during Operation 'Ball Lightning' in central Bosnia, and Operations 'Snowstorm' and 'Rustling Forest' in eastern Bosnia. Ending in late January 1944, these operations killed more than 11,000 Partisans but failed to destroy the guerrillas, so smaller-scale operations continued throughout 1944.

Operations in 1944

On 25 May 1944, a reinforced reconnaissance battalion from 369th Div joined Op 'Knight's Move', alongside elements of its sister 373rd 'Tiger' Div and 1st Mtn Div, a regimental group from SS Div '*Prinz Eugen*', 500th SS Parachute Bn, a platoon from the Brandenburg Div, 202nd Panzer Bn and 92nd Mot Inf Regt, supported by a number of regular Croatian and irregular Chetnik units. The primary objectives of this Seventh Axis Offensive were the killing or capture of the Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito, and the destruction of his headquarters at Drvar. Following its relative failure, on 18–20 August the 369th Div took part in Op 'Wolf's Den' on the Pelješac Peninsula.

In October 1944 the Partisans captured Dubrovnik, where 369th Div suffered heavy casualties. On 4 October I/369th Regt was captured in

Croatian legionaries of either 373rd or 392nd Div during their training at Stockerau. Although the date is 1943, note that all wear German M1935 tunics with dark green collars and shoulder straps, and box-pleated pockets. Some of the helmets have the German tricolour shield decal on the right side partly or wholly scraped off, and one or two may have a crudely painted Croatian shield in its place. Interestingly, most carry pairs of slung bags for stick grenades, in the World War I manner. (HR HDA 00391)



Trebinje, followed by the defeat of II/370th Regt at Janjina on the 16th. The division also suffered significant losses at Stolac, while the entire I/370th was destroyed around Ston. During the final retreat from Dubrovnik the remains of 369th Div lost most of their vehicles and heavy weapons, as well as many men in an ambush at Vukov Klanac on 24 October.

By November the Axis military situation in Croatia had become critical. The survivors of the division assembled in Mostar to guard the left flank of South-East Command and Army Group 'E', which was retreating from Serbia and Montenegro via Sarajevo and north along the Bosna river to Slavonski Brod. The 369th and 370th Regts were filled out with German sailors and soldiers from various depleted units, thus significantly reducing the proportion of Croats in the ranks. After the withdrawal of 118th Light Div the 369th was the only major German formation still operational in the Mostar region, so C-in-C South-East transferred a number of battalions from 964th Fortress Bde as reinforcements for the division.

Final operations and retreat, 1945

For several months from early December 1944 elements of the division took part in a series of operations led by V SS Mtn Corps against the Partisans in eastern Bosnia. On 19 December the 370th Regt participated in Operation 'Coil', whose goal was the capture of high ground around the village of Lise, an important strongpoint for the defence of Mostar. Due to supply shortages Corps authorized the expenditure of only two artillery shells per gun, leaving the regiment with little support. Immediately afterwards the more ambitious Operation 'Mars' was launched against the (now) People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (PLAY) forces in the area south-west of the village of Kocerina, west of Mostar. The 370th Regt, together with the ISC 9th Ustasha Active Bde and an Ustasha militia company, managed to push parts of 13th Dalmatian Bde of the PLAY 9th Div, and 10th Herzegovina Bde of the 29th Div, back around Kocerina, while II/370th Regt advanced into Buhovo, gaining time for the defenders of Mostar.

As part of the ongoing defence of that critically important city, I/ & II/370th took part in Operation 'Schlageter' on 23 January 1945; this successful surprise attack on PLAY positions near Lise seized the Jara and Biogradica heights. On 27–29 January, Kampfgruppe Becker commenced Operation 'North Wind'; this battle-group comprised the regimental HQ, I/ & III/370th Regt, and two battalions of 369th Artillery Regt, operating with units from the ISC 9th Mtn Division. This major operation was designed to advance from Mostar and Široki Brijeg towards Čitluk and Čapljina, then towards Ljubuški and Metković, to cut the line of communications of PLAY forces moving westwards south of Mostar. The operation appears to have taken the Partisan forces by surprise: three bridges over the Neretva river were quickly captured and destroyed, so the Axis forces could immediately fall back to their positions around Mostar while leaving an element at Čapljina.

In direct response, a large Partisan offensive was mounted against Mostar in late January 1945, which threatened to overwhelm the outnumbered 369th Division. Backed by assorted ISC units, the division put up a ferocious fight, but by 15 February they were forced to abandon the city. Retreating westwards, the 369th Div was forced to abandon much



of its heavy equipment, and, having lost a very high proportion of its German cadres, its effectiveness was almost at an end (the German OKW war diaries reported that the division had been wiped out). What remained, now described as a Kampfgruppe, arrived to the north of Brod on 17 April as the entire Axis line fell back towards the west. The debris of the division hoped to establish a final defensive position around Karlovac and, once this was abandoned, around the Croatian capital, Zagreb. On 28 April 1945 the 370th Inf-Gren Regt numbered just 515 men.

The remains of the division joined columns of ISC troops and various irregular bands from Serbia and Montenegro, together with bedraggled groups of civilians, in attempting to reach and surrender to British troops in the hope of better treatment than they could expect from Tito's Communists. The division effectively broke up, and from 10 May various groups of survivors took opportunities to surrender in various locations across Slovenia and Austria. What remained of the 369th 'Devil's' Division was disarmed by the British 6th Armd Div in Austria, but a small unit, about a battalion in strength, caused considerable alarm among weak PLAY forces west of Dravograd as it sought to reach the Austrian border. Others had to march as far as Bleiburg in Austria, where most of the survivors from the ISC armed forces formally surrendered on 15 May 1945. In all, 160 officers and 2,876 men from 369th Div surrendered to the British, but most of the Croatian soldiers were promptly sent back

Soldiers of Inf-Gren Regt 383 from 373. 'Tigar' Div photographed in Zagreb in spring 1944, wearing either M1940 or M1943 tunics, and marching boots. (A trainee of the division photographed at Stockerau in winter 1943-44 was wearing knee-length puttees instead.) In late May this division would take part in the German Operation 'Knight's Move' against the Partisan strongholds in the Drvar-Bosanski Petrovac area of western Bosnia. (HR HDA NL00657)

to the Yugoslav Partisans, who executed most of them. The divisional commander in 1943–44, *GenLt* Fritz Neidholt, was extradited to Yugoslavia and tried for atrocities allegedly committed by his men; he was hanged on 27 February 1947.

373rd (CROATIAN) INFANTRY DIVISION

On 6 January 1943 the Wehrmacht formed a second German-Croatian division, for service inside the ISC against the Partisans. It was designated 373. Infanterie-Division (Kroat.), but its men adopted the nickname *Tigar* ('Tiger') Division. It was organized similarly to the 369th Div, with two Kroatisches Infanterie-Grenadier Regts, the 383rd and 384th; the 373rd Croatian Artillery Regt; and support units numbered 373rd – pioneer, signals, reconnaissance and Panzerjäger battalions and a horse-drawn supply company, plus additional small detachments. The 373rd Div was assembled and trained at Stockerau and Döllersheim in Austria, around a cadre of 3,500 German troops joined by 8,500 soldiers from 7th Mtn Bde of the ISC's *Domobranstvo* regular forces – the latter provided troops for two battalions to each new regiment. With a total strength of about 12,000, the division was commanded by the German *GenLt* Emil Zellner and most of its officer cadre was German, as were many NCOs. All battalions were commanded by Germans except for 373rd Recce Bn, which was led by the Croat Maj Bakarec.

Operations in 1943

The 373rd Div left its Austrian training areas over 1–12 May 1943, travelling by train via Vienna, Graz and Marburg to Zagreb. Its first mission was to secure areas north and north-west of Mostar, which contained bauxite (aluminium ore) reserves essential to the German war effort. After a few weeks of minor skirmishes, from mid-June the division began sending out strong Jagdkommandos – lightly-armed and mobile 'hunter units' of company or battalion strength – to harass Partisans operating in its allocated areas.² In early July a search-and-destroy operation was conducted west of the Kupres–Bugojno–Jajce road, during which local Chetnik units began acting in support. The division then moved north and its headquarters relocated to Prijedor; for the next two months divisional elements were constantly patrolling and fighting minor engagements.

On 5 August 1943 *GenLt* Eduard Aldrian replaced Zellner in command, and 373rd Div was placed under Second Panzer Army, which had been redeployed to the Balkans from the Eastern Front. Problems were growing: during 18–22 August more than 100 Croat and Bosnian Muslim soldiers deserted for a variety of reasons, and the desertion rate worsened after the capitulation of Italy in September 1943. In late August and early September 1943 the division shifted again, this time to Bihać to relieve 114th Jäger Div, itself transferred to the Adriatic coast to cover the threat of Allied landings. During this redeployment parts of the division were ambushed by Partisans, causing significant casualties and the loss of several vehicles and guns. In September, 373rd Div came under the control of the newly-formed XV Mountain Corps led by *GenLt* Rudolf Lütters.

² Interested readers will find more details of German anti-partisan tactics in Elite 207, *World War II Partisan Warfare in Italy*.



When Partisan units surrounded the Croatian regular garrison of Prijedor during the second half of October 1943 the 383rd Regt relieved it, and conducted clearance sweeps around the town until heavy snowfalls put an end to operations in the first week of November. The 373rd's first major divisional operation came during Operation 'Panther' between 10 and 24 December 1943, alongside 371st Inf and 1st Cossack divisions; this aimed to encircle Partisan forces located on Mount Šamarica, in the Kostajnica Forest and the area north of Bosanski Novi. Despite taking heavy losses the troops committed achieved little; it was immediately followed by Operation 'Ristow', whose objective was to clear the area south of the Sana river between Bosanski Novi and Prijedor. The 373rd Div committed 383rd Inf-Gren Regt, reinforced by three tanks from 202nd Panzer Bn, and supported by I/373rd Artillery Regt and the ISC's 3rd Mtn Brigade. 'Ristow', during 24–29 December, was very costly, and I/383rd alone suffered 100 casualties.

Operations in January–August 1944

The New Year brought a renewed Partisan offensive against Banja Luka, the second largest city in Bosnia, which had already been under fire for several days. The headquarters of XV Mtn Corps, which was in the city, deployed I/383rd to bolster its defences. They arrived just in time for the enemy assault, and played a major role in the defence of Banja Luka until relieved by 901. PzGren-Lehr Regiment. Following this battle the division cleared and secured the area around the city. At the end of March 1944 most of 383rd Inf Regt was deployed to Knin to secure the road between there and Bihać. The next mission came between 7 and 16 May, when the division participated in Operation 'Morning Star'

A group of Croatian soldiers from one of the three legionary divisions in summer 1944. Wearing a mixture of field caps, and M1943 tunics with unpleated pockets, they are armed with pistols, which probably identifies them as AFV crewmen from a divisional reconnaissance battalion. The officer in the centre, apparently wearing the light olive-brown tropical tunic and matching cap, is Josip Plavetić. His decorations are the Iron Cross 2nd Class and, on his left breast, the 'Small Bronze Medal of Leader Ante Pavelić for Courage', above a Wound Badge, the Croatian Legion's lime-leaf badge, and the Infantry Assault badge. Note the very pale, baggy trousers and the left-sleeve chevron of the squatting *Gefreiter*. Some of these men have the added bar across the shoulder straps that identified cadet NCOs. (Private collection, KAFOTKA.NET)

alongside elements of 392nd (Croatian) Inf Div, 92nd Motorized and 1st Jäger Regts of the Brandenburg PzGren Div, and Ustasha units. Tasked with clearing Partisans from the Krbavsko Polje region around Udbina and to the west and southwest of Bihać, the operation was a significant success; 438 Partisans were killed and 56 captured plus 18 defectors, along with large quantities of arms, ammunition, vehicles and supplies.

This would be the springboard for the famous Operation 'Knight's Move' launched on 25 May 1944 in western Bosnia (see above, under 369th Div). The 373rd Div formed a significant part of the ground forces, undertaking two of the nine co-ordinated thrusts on the Partisan stronghold in the Drvar-Bosanski Petrovac area. The first, from the village of Srb towards Drvar, was made by Kampfgruppe Willam of the 384th Inf-Gren Regt, in order to take over positions initially targeted by 500th SS-Parachute Bn, which would lead the operation with an airborne assault on Drvar, and then join with them to attack in the direction of Bosanski Petrovac. The second thrust, from Lapac through Kulen Vakuf, saw a battalion group tasked with capturing the crossroads at Vrtoče and, if necessary, advancing north-west towards Bihać to open the road. However, Kampfgruppe Willam was unable to overcome resistance by the Partisan 2nd Lika Bde and was halted short of Drvar, so the SS-Fallschirmjäger were relieved on 26 May by another column attacking from the direction of Bihać. Four days into the operation, on 29 May, the other battalion group attacked strong Partisan positions east, north and north-west of Prekaja, but their advance was delayed by a lack of ammunition. After receiving new orders this group renewed its assault on 31 May, occupying the Prekaja area and capturing two Partisan tanks. '*Unternehmen Rösselsprung*' had already failed, however: Tito and his principal HQ staff had escaped to the south and been flown to Italy.

The 373rd Div was then deployed along the Una valley, aside from two battalions of 383rd Inf-Gren Regt left in the Prijedor–Ljubija area, and two battalions of the 384th in Drvar and Petrovac. During summer 1944 the lines of communication in the division's sector came under repeated attacks. On 1 and 2 August the Petrovac garrison, consisting of II/ 384th Regt under *Maj* Schreiber, repelled attacks by the Partisan 6th and 13th Krajina Bdes; but the attacks intensified the following month, when on 6 September the Partisan 4th Div attacked the Prijedor garrison. The *Domobranstvo* units there were already badly demoralized and offered little resistance, so Prijedor fell the next day. This isolated Ljubija, which was defended by I/383rd Regt, the 4th and 6th Bns of 8th Ustasha Bde and Ustasha militia. When the Partisans attacked, the German commander of I/383rd, *Hptm* Ahrendt, decided to evacuate Ljubija and to try to reach Bosanski Novi, marching off-road with his 3,000-strong force. Under steady Partisan fire, the withdrawal descended into disorder: Ahrendt suffered a nervous breakdown and was replaced by *Hptm* Rettich, who was only able to lead a much-reduced force into Bosanski Novi. The I/383rd had again lost about 100 men, so in the autumn of 1944 the division absorbed 2nd Rifle Bde of the ISC *Domobranstvo* as a third infantry regiment, renamed 385th (Croatian).

Operations in winter 1944–spring 1945

Throughout the autumn of 1944 the Partisans continued to press the Una valley, their 4th Corps from the west and 5th Corps from the east.

(Continued on page 33)



CROATIAN LEGION (369th RIR)
 1: Junior officer; Kharkov, winter 1941–42
 2: Cavalry trooper; Ukraine, autumn 1942
 3: Motorcyclist, Artillery Bn; Ukraine, autumn 1942



CROATIAN AIR FORCE LEGION

1: *Oberfeldwebel*, 10th Reinforced Fighter Sqn; Zagreb, Dec 1942

2: *Oberfeldwebel*, 15. Staffel/ JG52; Ukraine, summer 1944

3: Aircrewman, 5th Bomber Group; Germany, summer 1941



CROATIAN NAVAL LEGION
 1: *Oberleutnant zur See*, 23rd Minesweeper Flotilla, 1942
 2: *Olt zur See*, 23rd Submarine-Hunter Flotilla, spring 1944
 3: *Matrosengefreiter*, guard order



ITALIAN-CROATIAN LEGION (LMB)

1: *Capomanipolo*, Bn HQ; Ukraine, summer 1942

2: Private, Ukraine, summer 1942

3: *Capomanipolo*, winter 1941–42



CROATIAN LEGIONARY DIVISIONS

1: Legionary, 369th (Croatian) Inf Div, 1943

2: Legionary, 373rd (Croatian) Inf Div, 1943

3: Legionary, 392nd (Croatian) Inf Div, 1944



**13th SS MOUNTAIN DIVISION
'HANDSCHAR'**

1: *Waffen-Unterscharführer,
Feldgendarmarie*

2: *W-Scharführer, walking-out
dress, summer 1944*

3: *W-Unterscharführer,
Gebirgsjäger, late 1944*



GERMAN-CROATIAN POLICE
1: *Hauptmann der Schützpoliciei*,
late 1944
2: *Schützpolicist*, late 1944
3: *Oberwachmeister*, early 1945



MISCELLANEOUS UNIFORMS

1: *Waffen-Gebirgsjäger*, 23rd SS
Mtn Div 'Kama'; Hungary, 1944

2: *Feldwebel*, 22nd AA Div;
Germany, autumn 1944

3: Volunteer, *Banda 2*, MVAC;
Croatia, winter 1942–43

In September, 4th Corps mounted attacks on the garrisons at Cazin and Sunja. By 7 November, when 4th Corps renewed its assault on Cazin, the garrison had been reinforced with an element from 373rd Div, but in two days' fighting the defenders were almost wiped out; of the reinforced company from 373rd Div just two men escaped by hiding among civilians.

On 6 December 1944 the 373rd Div suffered heavily in the defence of Knin, especially III/383rd Inf-Gren Regt, whose entire strength were killed or captured. After 5 December, II/383rd and 6th Co of II/384th, which had been encircled in Gračac, were forced to surrender after running out of ammunition, with just a few men escaping towards Bihać. Desertion rates grew steadily: during an attack by the partisan 35th Lika Div later that month a large number of Croats from the division went over to the Partisans, followed by a further two complete companies.

By January 1945 the remnants of 373rd Div were in the Bihać area as part of XV Mtn Corps; during the remaining months of the war they fought in northern Dalmatia, parts of Lika and Kordun, and later in Banija. When the Partisans launched their spring offensive on 20 March 1945 the division was soon surrounded in Bihać, but in stubborn fighting the 373rd together with the 10th Ustasha Div managed to hold out until relieved by 104th Jäger Division. The 373rd then moved along the Una river to tackle Partisan forces advancing on Zagreb. At Kostajnica most of the surviving Croatian soldiers were separated out from the Germans and probably dismissed, but they now only numbered 2,000–3,000. The remnant of the division withdrew via Sunja, Sisak and Zagreb to Brežice in Slovenia, where it surrendered to the Partisans at Raka on 10 May 1945, and any remaining Croats left. The disarmed German troops were allowed to travel back towards Germany for several days, but eventually became Partisan prisoners. The last divisional commander, *GenMaj* Hans Gravenstein, was tried by a Yugoslavian military court for his men's alleged atrocities, and was hanged in 1947.

392nd (CROATIAN) INFANTRY DIVISION

The last German-Croatian division was formed on 17 August 1943; like its predecessors, the 392. Infanterie-Division (Kroat.) was established at Dollersheim. Nicknamed *Plava* ('Blue') by its men, the division was commanded until its final weeks by *GenMaj* Johann Mickle, a former officer of the Austro-Hungarian Army in World War I. Most of its officers and NCOs and the core of its rankers were German; 3,500 Germans were joined by 8,500 soldiers of the ISC *Domobranstvo*, giving a total strength of about 12,000 all ranks. One infantry regiment and the artillery regiment were formed in Döllersheim, the other infantry regiment in Zwettl, with the signal battalion based in Stockerau and the pioneer battalion at Krems. Aside from the three German/Croatian divisions, around 100,000 recruits from the ISC passed through the Döllersheim military area, whose two biggest training camps were at Kaufholz and Kirchenholz, with smaller specialist camps elsewhere. A Special Croatian Training Brigade established there existed until the end of World War II.

The 'Blue' Division was structured in the same way as the other two. Its two Kroatisches Infanterie-Grenadier regiments were numbered 846th and 847th, and all the other units and elements 392nd. Training lasted until the final days of December 1943, and as 1944 began the 392nd Div was transported to Zagreb and Karlovac, to be assigned an

operational area running from southern Slovenia, along the Croatian Adriatic coast, to the city of Knin. Placed under XV Mountain Corps as part of Second Panzer Army, the division was initially headquartered in Karlovac. Fearing an Anglo-American landing from Italy, the German High Command gave the division the first task of securing the Adriatic coastline between Rijeka and Karlobag, including all islands except Krk, and a zone extending 60km (37 miles) inland, including the protection of the crucial supply route between Karlovac and Senj. The 392nd Div also took over responsibility for the security of the Zagreb-Karlovac railway from 1st Cossack Division.

Baptism of fire

These areas had been heavily infiltrated by the Partisans since the Italian capitulation, particularly the key port of Senj, and from their first night in their garrison areas the new division came under attack. Even before it was fully deployed, it was ordered to march on 13 January 1944 to relieve the ISC garrison at Ogulin. Led by the 847th Regiment, in their first engagements the Croat soldiers panicked and most of their German leaders soon became casualties. Nevertheless, Ogulin was relieved on 16 January, and the division's advance could continue south to Skradnik to secure the local villages.

Operation 'Drežnica' (a village near Ogulin) was a drive through to the coast, forcing the passes through the Velika Kapela massif and the Velebit range at more than 1,750m (5,750ft) above sea level, in snow up to thigh-deep. Though delayed by mines and roadblocks, the division took the Kapela and Vratnik passes with minimal casualties. A series of engagements along the road to the coast followed, and after some close-quarter fighting with the Partisan 13th Assault Div the Croats captured and destroyed most of the enemy supply dump north-west of Lokve before securing Senj. The 846th Inf-Gren Regt was then directed to guard the division's main supply route from Senj to Generalski Stol, and to rebuild various positions including former Italian forts in the Kapela and Vratnik passes. Meanwhile, the 847th was tasked with securing the coastline; spread out between Karlobag and Crikvenica and supported by elements of the artillery and pioneers, they began building fortifications against possible Allied landings. The troops in Karlobag linked up with 264th Inf Div, which was responsible for the coastline further to the south-east. However, Partisan interdiction of the route from Karlovac, combined with Allied air attacks on coastal shipping and Senj harbour, quickly rendered the supply situation difficult.

In late February or early March, 847th Inf-Gren Regt, supported by an Ustasha battalion, was advancing on Plaški south of Ogulin when they were halted by deep snow, and found their supply lines under Partisan attack, resulting in the loss of 30 soldiers. In March, the 847th occupied the Adriatic islands of Rab and Pag without encountering resistance, while the 846th conducted an operation in the Gacka river valley around Otočac and assisted the ISC *Domobranstvo* in enforcing conscription orders on the local population. However, throughout the spring of 1944 the 846th Regt was primarily engaged in conducting Jagdkommando pursuit operations against the Partisans, and in guarding supply convoys moving through the Kapela Pass. The 392nd Div also succeeded in restoring a land connection with the garrison at Gospić, which had been reliant on maritime supply since the Italian surrender, and in driving

three Partisan battalions away from the outskirts of Otočac.

One difficulty faced by the division during the fighting in the mountains was the lack of suitable mountain artillery; its own 392nd Arty Regt was equipped with field howitzers with a range of 12km (7½ miles), but was seriously limited in the cover that it could provide for fluid operations in mountainous terrain. Nevertheless, in mid-April 1944 the newly promoted *GenLt* Mickl ordered Operation 'Mace Blow' by 846th Inf-Gren Regt and part of 847th, supported by the divisional artillery and the flak battalion. The Germans had learned that the Partisan 13th Asslt Div was using the Drežnica valley as a huge armoury, hiding captured Italian arms and ammunition in the villages (even in fake graves in cemeteries). Over two weeks the division drove the Partisans north to the area around Mrkopalj and Delnice, and captured sufficient materiel to equip two divisions, including 30 tons of small-arms ammunition and 15 tons of artillery shells.

The Partisan reply came on 5 May, when their 35th Lika Div attacked from the Plitvice Lakes and captured the village of Ramljane, as well as cutting the Otočac-Gospić road. In response, Mickl planned Operation 'Morning Star' to clear Partisan forces from the Krbavsko Polje region around Udbina, which ran from 7 to 16 May (see above, under 373rd Division). In the same month the division received 500 German reinforcements, and formed a field depot battalion. Over the following months the 392nd Div continued to engage the Partisans, often fighting alongside a group of Ustasha units up to 12,000 strong, mostly in the northern coastal area of Croatia and its islands.

Operations and retreat, January–May 1945

After the fall of Knin in late 1944, 392nd Div also participated in German efforts to create a defensive line around the Otočac-Bihać area during January 1945. Tasked with engaging the 4th Partisan Army advancing from the south-east, and supporting XCVII Corps which was in danger of being enveloped near Rijeka (Fiume), during early April the division withdrew westward under sustained Partisan attacks, to reach the Rijeka area in the middle of the month. During fighting on the Lika coast, Mickl was shot in the head near Senj on 9 April and died in hospital in Rijeka the following day. Fighting continued until 24 April, when, north of Rijeka, the German leadership released most of the remaining 3,000-odd Croatian soldiers from further service and surrendered to the Partisans, although some Croats remained with the division. As the war concluded some of



Legionaries of the 392nd Div changing a guard in the Stockerau training camp. The soldier on the right has a trained signaller's yellow-on-green *Blitz* patch above his *Gefreiter's* rank chevron. (Private collection)

those released apparently headed to the Slovene coast, where they were organized as a separate unit of the now largely illusory remnant of the ISC Armed Forces under the command of Gen Matija Parac, which was officially part of Gen Draža Mihailović's Chetniks but was actually directed by Gen Miodrag Damjanović. These units then retreated into British-occupied northern Italy.

The rump of the division was ordered north towards Klagenfurt in Austria. Some of the remaining Croats were killed when XCVII Corps attempted a failed break-out. Consequently, on 5 May 1945 *GenObst* Alexander Löhr, C-in-C South-East, authorized that corps, now including the 392nd Div, to surrender. The Partisans accepted the German surrender two days later in the area between Rijeka and Ilirska Bistrica, when the remaining Croats and some Italian Fascist troops still fighting in XCVII Corps were released. The disarmed Germans were initially allowed to make their way towards Germany, but on 12 May the Partisans decided to take them prisoner.

WAFFEN-SS DIVISIONS

13th SS MOUNTAIN DIVISION 'HANDSCHAR' (CROATIAN No. 1)

When the ISC declared independence from Yugoslavia on 10 April 1941, part of the territory it claimed was the former Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Bosna i Hercegovina*), the western part of which had historically been part of the Croatian homeland. The province had a mixed population of Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and about 40 per cent Muslim descendants of Croats and Serbs who had converted during the centuries-long Turkish occupation. It was these Muslims that *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler targeted for recruitment at a time of

growing pressure on Waffen-SS manpower. Inspired by propaganda about the ISC's 2nd *Domobranstvo* Regt, whose troops wore the Muslim *fez* cap, and by the renowned bravery of Bosnian soldiers in World War I, Himmler decided to create a Waffen-SS mountain division of Bosnian Muslims. (This apparently bizarre decision accorded with the Nazis' dream of rallying some of the world's 350 million Muslims to their side in the struggle against the British Empire.)

The idea was approved by Hitler on 13 February 1943, but also required the agreement of the Croatian government; Pavelić and his ministers were deeply opposed to the SS creaming off potential recruits from ISC territory, but eventually (and grudgingly) agreed to the division's creation on 5 March. However, the subsequent delay in settling on its title reflected a stubborn ideological problem.

The new division was assigned the number '13' in the Waffen-SS order of battle, and its original title in July 1943 was 13. Kroatische SS-Freiwilligen Gebirgs Division ('Croatian SS-Volunteer Mountain Division'). In October 1943 it became 13. SS-Freiwilligen bosn.herzogow. Gebirgs

The divisional collar patch shows clearly in this cover photo from a December 1943 issue of the *'Kölnische Illustrierte Zeitung'* of soldiers from the 'Handschar' Division on parade. Note the relatively tall *fez*, here probably the dark red version. (Private collection)





Troops from the 'Handschar' Division on the march; the two MG42 machine guns – issued only one per section in rifle platoons – perhaps indicate part of a battalion MG company. All wear the field-grey *fez*, and the first-model *SS-Tarnjacke* camouflage smock; most carry spare link for the machine guns, and have fighting knives tucked into their belts. (Private collection)

Division (Kroatien) – 'SS-Volunteer Bosnian-Herzegovinian Mtn Div (Croatia)'; but in May 1944 it was definitively designated 13. Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS 'Handschar' (kroatische Nr. 1). The honour-title 'Handschar' was (wrongly) supposed to mean 'Scimitar', but the rest of the name revealed the sensitivity of the arch-racist Himmler. He could not tolerate calling such obviously non-Aryan troops simply 'SS' or 'SS Volunteers' like those foreigners already enlisted in Northern and Western Europe. The adoption of the form Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS ('Armed Mountain Division of the SS') was intended to hint at its 'non-Germanic' ethnicity, and the same style would be followed for several future formations.

The division was composed around Waffen-Gebirgsjäger Regt der SS Nr. 27 & Nr. 28 (kroatisches Nrs. 1 & 2), each of three battalions, and SS Waffen-Artillerie Regt 13, with four batteries (15cm K16 and 10.5cm le FH18/40 howitzers, and 7.5cm GebK36 mountain guns). Also numbered 13 were an SS-Reconnaissance Bn (equipped with Austrian Steyr eight-wheeled ADGZ armoured cars with two turret MGs); an SS-Panzerjäger Bn (5cm PaK38 anti-tank guns); an SS-Volunteer Flak Bn (both heavy 8.8cm FlaK36 and light 20mm FlaK38 AA guns); an SS-Mtn Pioneer Bn, and other support detachments.

The divisional establishment was set very high, at 26,000 men, but when the recruits were sent to France for training in mid-1943 they numbered only 15,000 – and far from all of those were volunteers. The ISC government hampered recruitment as far as they dared, but strength had reached 19,000 by the end of that year, of whom 2,800 were Catholic Croats and 1,000 were Albanians, and the rest Muslims from Bosnia and the Sandjak region. As per previous practice, the officers and NCOs were mostly Germans (both Reichsdeutsche from the Fatherland, and ethnic-German Volksdeutsche from the historic Balkan diaspora), including cadres from the largely Austrian 7th SS-Vol Mtn Div 'Prinz Eugen'. The first commander on paper was *SS-Staf* Herbert von Obwurzer, but he was rapidly replaced on 1 August 1943 with *SS-Oberf* (later *SS-Brigaf*) Karl-Gustav Sauberzweig. On 1 June 1944 *SS-Oberf* (later *SS-Brigaf*) Desiderius Hampel took command, but this was a theoretical appointment from October 1944, when the division was reduced to a battle-group led by a major.

Other key personnel were the 20 or so Muslim *imams* (priests), whose responsibility for the men's spiritual wellbeing gave them great influence. It was to the imams rather than their often-disdainful officers that the



A captain in the 'Handschar' Div (right), with the rank of either SS- or Waffen-Hauptsturmführer depending upon his ethnicity, photographed with two of his men; all wear second-model camouflage smocks with added loops for foliage. His rank is identified by the silver-on-black left collar patch, and the green-on-black oakleaves-and-bars patch on the sleeve of his smock. Note the relatively low profile of the Muslim fez caps. The soldiers have tropical-type canvas webbing Y-straps, and carry two types of hand grenades: on the left the M39 'egg', and in the centre the M24 'stick' type. (Private collection)

men would look in critical situations, as first became evident during training around Le Puy in the Haute Loire department of France. Resentment at their treatment peaked on 16–17 September 1943 at the village of Villefranche-de-Rouergue, where a mutiny was fomented by three Communist infiltrators and a handful of malcontents. Despite the killing of some German officers and NCOs, the incident has been exaggerated: the great majority of the dispersed troops did not know it was happening, and some of them suppressed it. Fourteen soldiers were executed, and 825 sent to labour or concentration camps.

The division was moved to Silesia in Germany to complete its training. Strength reached 21,000 in January 1944, and in mid-February 'Handschar' was sent home for active service against the Partisans in north-eastern Bosnia, western Serbia and southern Sirmium. Between March and September, alongside the 'Prinz Eugen' Div in SS-Ogruf Artur Phleps' V SS-Mtn Corps, the division participated in many security operations, earning a reputation for both competence in the anti-guerrilla role and atrocities against civilians. It was weakened on two occasions by large transfers of men to form the nuclei of the new 21st and 23rd SS Divs, but in September 1944 it still had a 'paper' strength of around 18,500 (about one-third of them Germans) despite some 2,000 desertions during that month alone. The division was then reorganized, losing all but its infantry regiments when assets were transferred to a planned new 'IX Armed Mtn Corps of the SS' (see below, under 23rd SS Mtn Div 'Kama').

As the Red Army advanced towards the Croatian border in autumn 1944 the division was ordered to Slavonia and southern Hungary. Desertions were constant, as many Muslims tried to return to Bosnia to protect their homes and families, and the Muslim component declined as replacements were drawn in from Germany and Hungary. In about mid-October the remaining Muslims were discharged, and the German and Volksdeutsche rump of the division formed SS-Kampfgruppe Hanke led by SS-Stubaf (later SS-Ostufaf) Hans Hanke. In December this

battle-group was fighting the Red Army on the Hungarian border near Barcs on the Drava river, under LXIX Corps of Second Panzer Army. After further resistance between Budapest and Lake Balaton, at the end of March 1945 the survivors retreated westwards into the Austrian mountains, where they finally surrendered to British troops on 7–8 May.

23rd SS MOUNTAIN DIVISION 'KAMA' (CROATIAN No. 2)

During early summer 1944 the creation of a second anti-Partisan Muslim Waffen-SS division commenced, following formal approval by Hitler on 17 June. This formation was designated 23. Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS 'Kama' (kroatische Nr. 2). The decision was then made to raise a new IX Waffen-Gebirgs-Korps der SS, composed of the 13th and 23rd Croatian-Muslim divisions alongside the Albanian 21. Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS 'Skanderbeg' and a second planned Albanian division.

Recruitment for the 'Kama' Division started on 10 June 1944, and a strength of about 10,000 men was planned, led once again mostly by German cadres as well as some Croatian officers from the 'Handschar' Division. The former commander of W-Geb-Regt der SS Nr. 28, SS-Staf Hellmuth Raithel, was appointed to lead the new division. Up to 1,350 troops were also transferred from the 'Handschar', including the entire Recce Bn, augmented by a new group of Croatian Catholic and Muslim recruits. However, in September 1944 the division could only muster 3,793 men, who had to be moved to the Bačka region (annexed by Hungary following the 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia) to avoid interference from the Partisans during their basic training. Consequently, this division was never operational: only the 55th and 56th Armed Mtn Lt Inf Regts (3rd and 4th Croatian, respectively) ever existed, each with a reduced strength of two battalions of four companies, as there were neither the personnel nor the equipment for artillery or other support units.

As the Red Army's front line advanced during September 1944 the Bačka training base became vulnerable. Following the example of the 'Handschar' a year earlier, the 'Kama' also mutinied in October 1944, and although the trouble was suppressed the authorities decided to disband the formation and transfer willing troops to other units. The division ceased to exist on 31 October; the German cadre returned to SS-Kampfgruppe Hanke of the 'Handschar' Div, and others were allocated to the planned 31st SS-Vol Gren Div being formed from conscripted Hungarian Volksdeutsche (though some deserted en route). The divisional number '23' was allocated to the Dutch SS-Vol PzGren Div 'Nederland', then in the process of formation from the existing assault brigade.

GERMAN-CROATIAN POLICE UNITS

On 15 July 1943 an agreement was signed between the ISC and Germany, whereby a German-Croatian Police Force (*Deutsch-Kroatische Polizei*) under German Police and SS command would be raised for 'internal security

A Waffen-Hauptscharführer of 13th SS Mtn Div 'Handschar' off duty in 1944, wearing the red fez with a private-purchase white summer walking-out tunic. The oval 'Edelweiss' patch of SS mountain troops is displayed on the right sleeve; the upper collar has an inset edging of NCOs' silver Tresse braid, and the collar patches are of regulation un-edged pattern – compare with portrait photo on page 45. (Private collection)





On the left of this snapshot is Ivan Skoko, a member of the German-Croatian Police. He is dressed in the original 'lead-blue' uniform, with an eight-button tunic faced with brown at the collar and cuffs and piped in the green *Truppenfarbe* of the Schutzpolizei. The silver-grey collar *Litzen* are on green patches edged with silver-grey cord; invisible here is the green wreathed eagle Police badge with a black swastika, worn on the upper left sleeve. The sidecap, with Police insignia, is of the 'Schiffchen' shape also worn by the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe. (Private collection)

duties'. It came under the authority of *SS-Gruf und GenLt de Polizei* Konstantin Kammerhofer, the equivalent of a Higher SS and Police Leader in Croatia. The officer and NCO cadres would be mostly German, with junior ranks drawn from volunteers or conscripts from the ISC. By September 1943 seven battalions had been formed, but the force's strength was gradually increased, and by the spring of 1944 it numbered 15 battalions.

These units were concentrated in threes to form *Polizei Freiwilligen-Regimenter (Kroatien)* 1 to 5. An additional 15 Police Volunteer Bns 'Croatia' were raised and numbered consecutively. In early 1945, 12 of these battalions were consolidated into a *Gendarmerie Division 'Croatia'*; however, this only existed on paper – the constituent battalions were scattered all over the country, and the new headquarters could not possibly concentrate them given the desperate circumstances of that time.

In December 1944, the *Befehlshaber der Ordnungspolizei (BdO – Police Commander)* in Zagreb raised the *Polizei Panzer-Jäger Kompanie 'Kroatien'* (Police Anti-Tank Company 'Croatia'), which was independent of the units listed above. Croats also manned the 16. *SS-Polizei Panzer Kompanie* (16th SS Police Armoured Company), which was equipped with two Škoda armoured cars, two Italian L6/40 light tanks and eight L3/35 tankettes. In all, 32,000 Croats served in these German police units, maintaining order and aiding the defence of strategic positions throughout the ISC.

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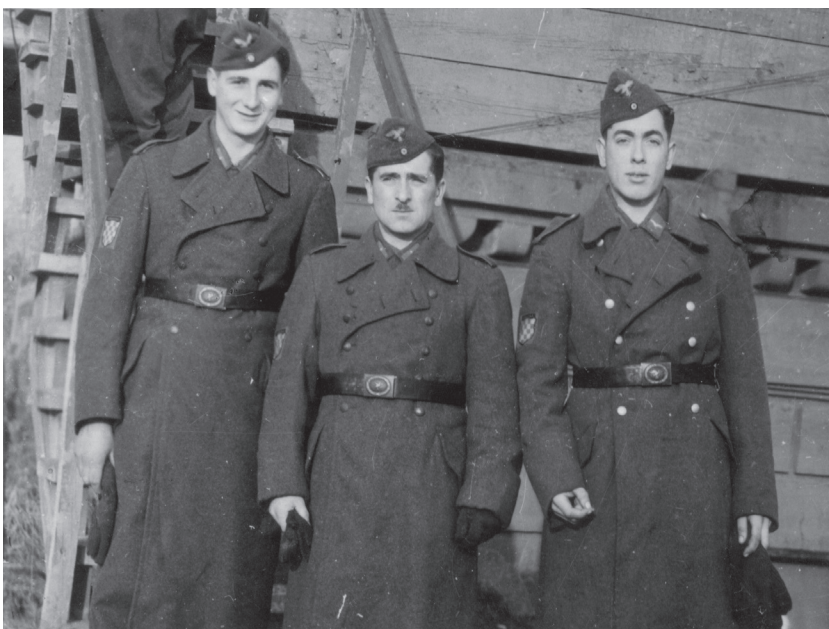
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A group of officers and men of the German-Croatian Police. They wear the all-grey 1944 five-button uniform tunic worn open at the collar, with Police insignia on the cap and left sleeve. Note (second from right) the small Croatian national shield patch worn on the left forearm, which was introduced only in October 1944; see Plate G1. (HR HDA 06386)



Three members of the Croatian Flak Legions photographed in either Fürth or Frankfurt-am-Main in 1944-45, all dressed in Luftwaffe greatcoats with Croatian shield patches on the right sleeve. (Mario Raguž Collection)

PLATE COMMENTARIES

Uniforms and Equipment

A: CROATIAN LEGION (369th REINFORCED INFANTRY REGIMENT)

When they left for training at Dollersheim the future legionaries were dressed in newly-produced greenish-grey ISC *Domobranstvo* ('Home Defence Force') M1941 uniforms. The tunic resembled the German M1935, though with internal rather than 'box' pocket pleats. One striking item was the peaked field cap, closely resembling the German *Bergmütze*



The *Hrvatska Legija 1941* ('Croatian Legion 1941') lime-leaf badge, authorized on 8 May 1942 for all legionaries fighting on the Eastern Front – the 369th RIR and Light Transport Bde, the two Air Force units, and the Navy flotilla. It was made of aluminium in the workshops of two Zagreb companies, Kraus Brothers and Me-Ba. Initially it was worn on the left side of the field cap, but a later regulation moved it to the left breast. Finally, from 6 April 1944 it was ordered worn on the right tunic pocket, but later photos show that this was often disregarded. (Private collection)



Machine-woven Croatian national sleeve insignia. This particular example was worn by *Oberleutenant zur See* Božidar Fedor Mažuranić of the Croatian Naval Legion. There were several versions, with and without the name HRVATSKA ('Croatia') above the red-and-white 'chessboard' shield; here it is lettered in red on the black backing. One alternative type, with the German-language KROATIEN, was worn by German cadre personnel in Croatian units. (Božidar Fedor Mažuranić Collection)

and anticipating the later German M1943. On arrival, all were issued with standard German arms and equipment. The German national eagle decal on the left side of the helmet was often balanced with a Croatian red-and-white 'chessboard' shield badge painted on the right side by individuals or units.

The legionaries left for the Eastern Front in the original Domobran uniform with a Croatian badge on the cap – a bronze oval wreath enclosing 'NHD' (in that order, with a larger central 'H') – but with German national badges and rank insignia. In line with other Wehrmacht foreign volunteer legions, nationality was more noticeably identified by a cloth badge on the upper left sleeve: a 'chessboard' shield with 25 red and white squares, surmounted by HRVATSKA ('Croatia') in red lettering on its black backing.

During service at the front worn-out clothing was replaced with standard German Army items, so that during 1942 most soldiers of 369th RIR were actually dressed in German uniforms. The Domobran field caps were the longest-lasting item, but by the end of 1942 they too had almost disappeared, replaced with the German M1934 or M1942 sidecap. Only the officers kept their Domobran service and field caps with Croatian insignia until the very end. By an order of 8 May 1942, Legion veterans were awarded the 'Croatian Legion 1941' badge, shaped like a lime leaf (see accompanying photo).

The 369th RIR's standard weapon was the 7.92mm Mauser 98k rifle; all NCOs had 9mm MP38 sub-machine guns, and some of them, like all the officers, 9mm Parabellum Luger P08 pistols.

A1: Junior officer; Kharkov, winter 1941–42

This subaltern wears a mixed uniform. His M1940 helmet, woollen neck toque and gloves, belt, mapcase and holstered P08 are German issue; his breeches, puttees and boots are from his Croatian M1941 *Domobranstvo* uniform; and his matching winter over-jacket is a privately acquired non-regulation item, tailored in military style.

A2: Cavalry trooper; Ukraine, autumn 1942

Ante Janjić was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class while serving with the 369th RIR's cavalry platoon, and wears the full medal here on the day of its presentation. He retains the *Domobranstvo* field cap with its bronze wreathed 'NHD' badge; the internal pocket pleats identify his tunic as also being of ISC origin, but it bears German *Litzen*, shoulder straps and right-breast eagle. The HRVATSKA-and-'chessboard' Croatian patch is worn on his left sleeve. He wears German boots, and is armed with an MP38 sub-machine gun. Such mixtures of uniform items, badges and equipment were typical for the Croatian Legion during 1942.

A3: Motorcyclist, Artillery Battalion; Ukraine, autumn 1942

This dispatch rider for the 369th RIR's attached artillery unit is identifiable as a Croatian solely by his puttees, just visible below the long Wehrmacht *Kradmantel* rubberized coat; the infantry seem to have had priority for the issue of marching boots. Note that (oddly) he has put on his German M1934 field cap, with its artillery-red *soutache* around the cockade, on top of a brown leather motorcycle helmet and goggles. He is armed with a Mauser 98k rifle, and wears standard belt and Y-strap equipment.

B: CROATIAN AIR FORCE LEGION

While training in Germany CAFL personnel wore uniforms and insignia almost identical to those of the Luftwaffe, except that



The Croatian Air Force Legion badge, in silver with red, white and black enamel. It was authorized on 10 September 1942 for all Air Force legionaries who served on the Eastern Front, and this pin-back version was worn on the right breast pocket. (Private collection)

the tunic collar was closed rather than open in the German style, and the uniform had matt silver decorative buttons. In September 1941 personnel either added German insignia to their Croatian uniforms or adopted regulation German uniforms and insignia.

A distinctive CAFL badge was introduced that October, but was not officially authorized until 10 September 1942. It was made in two versions: a metal badge, and an embroidered patch. Both displayed the red-and-white Croatian 'chessboard' shield centred against silver stylized wings, surmounted by a black 'U' inside a square 'troplet' (a Croatian motif of three interlaced ribbons). The metal badge was worn on the right breast pocket below the Luftwaffe eagle, while the patch is seen in photos worn on either upper sleeve. The same regulation of September 1942 prescribed Luftwaffe-style *Ärmelstreifen* (cuff titles), worn on the left forearm 10cm above the end. The dark blue, 2cm-wide, silver-edged bands were embroidered with one of four Croatian titles in capital letters: LOVCI – IZTOČNO BOJIŠTE ('Fighters – Eastern Front'); BOMBARDERI – IZT. BOJIŠTE ('Bombers – Eastern Front'); ZRAKOPLOVNI SAT – IZT. BOJIŠTE ('Air Force Company – Eastern Front'); or ZRAKOPLOVNA SKUPINA DŽAL ('Air Force Group Džal'). Soldiers of the 17th Air Force Company with FR der L 4 appear to have adopted regulation Luftwaffe uniforms.

B1: Oberfeldwebel, 10th Reinforced Fighter Squadron; Zagreb, December 1942

Oberfeldwebel (flight sergeant) Stjepan Martinašević, a Messerschmitt 'ace' who would record 11 confirmed aerial victories, was photographed at an award ceremony in Croatia after returning from his first combat tour on the Eastern Front. He wears the Luftwaffe *Fliegermütze* sidecap and *Tuchrock* service tunic, with conventional German insignia of service, branch and rank, and the winged CAFL badge on his right breast pocket. His awards are, above his left pocket, the Front Line Mission Clasp for Fighters in silver for 60 missions, and both classes of the Iron Cross. He has just been awarded the Croatian 'Large Silver Medal of Poglavinik Ante Pavelić for Courage'.

B2: Oberfeldwebel, 15. Staffel/ Jagdgeschwader 52; Ukraine, summer 1944

This NCO fighter pilot sports a suitably unstiffened and crushed *Schirmmütze*, a non-regulation black leather jacket,

and Luftwaffe-issue baggy tropical trousers in gold-khaki. He has added to the jacket a Luftwaffe right breast eagle, his shoulder straps of rank, and on his left sleeve a Croatian Legion 'chessboard' patch. A Walter P38 pistol is holstered on a Luftwaffe officers' brown service belt.

B3: Aircrewman, 5th Bomber Group; Germany, summer 1941

This member of a Dornier Do17Z bomber crew undergoing training at Greifswald is dressed in an early pre-war summer-weight, one-piece flying suit in very pale tan material. This is hard to identify from the original photograph: it is clearly not one of the variants of the standard *Kombination So/34*, since it lacks the distinctive covered diagonal zip fastener from right shoulder to left hip and the zipped leg pockets, but it may perhaps be a K So/33 as previously supplied to the Deutsche Luftsports Verband. He wears the Luftwaffe sidecap and zipped and strapped flying boots, and the aircrew parachute harness for a rear-attached *Rückenfallschirm 12B*, which he carries in its stowage bag.

C: CROATIAN NAVAL LEGION

When they departed for Bulgaria the Croatian legionaries were dressed in Royal Yugoslavian Navy uniforms with Czechoslovakian M1934 helmets. Once in Varna they were issued with German infantry weapons and Kriegsmarine uniforms and helmets, so they were only distinguishable by the usual national shield patch which they wore on the left sleeve. On 28 June 1942 the Croatian Naval Legion commemorative badge was issued to all Croatian personnel and German cadres who had served on the Eastern Front for at least two months; shaped as an oval lettered with HRVATSKA POMORSKA LEGIJA, and enclosing a 'chessboard' shield set on an anchor, it was worn on the lower left breast in differing officers' and ratings' versions. The coastal artillery wore German Army field-grey uniforms, again distinguished only by the Croatian shield patch on the left sleeve.

C1: Oberleutnant zur See, 23rd Minesweeper Flotilla, 1942

Lieutenant Božidar Mažuranić was photographed at Feodosiya, a small harbour on the south-eastern coast of Crimea, dressed entirely in Kriegsmarine uniform and greatcoat without any visible sign of his nationality. The



The Croatian Naval Legion badge, in both officers' silver and enamel and ratings' plain bronze versions, as authorized on 28 June 1942. (Private collection)

midnight-blue cap has gold insignia and, for this rank, narrow 'vandyked' edging to the black peak. His rank is displayed by a single gold 'pip' on Kriegsmarine shoulder straps of silver cord on midnight-blue underlay.

C2: Oberleutenant zur See, 23rd Submarine-Hunter Flotilla, spring 1944

The commander of the submarine-hunter UJ-2309, Lt Zdravko Pleško is dressed for sea duty in a white-topped cap and a black variant of the Kriegsmarine's normally dark grey 'U-boat leathers'. This collarless design was issued to the technical branches in place of the wide-collared seamen's version, for ease of movement in confined spaces. While grey leathers were far more common, the black version was occasionally issued to U-boat crews, and more widely to the crews of other types of craft.

C3: Matrosengefreiter, guard order

A Croatian seaman 2nd class on sentry duty; the Naval Legion had to be prepared to defend its small Black Sea harbours. Over his dark blue jumper and seaman's collar he wears the ten-button double-breasted 'pea jacket', with the plain cornflower-blue collar patches of junior ratings' ranks. Obscured here, he wears on his right breast the yellow Kriegsmarine national eagle. On his left sleeve the CNL's national patch surmounts the yellow star of the seaman's department, and his rating chevron. As per regulations, for this duty the trousers are rolled at the ankle over the deck boots. He has tucked his *Bordmütze* behind the cartridge pouches of his obsolete Yugoslavian M24 belt equipment.

D: ITALIAN-CROATIAN LEGION – LIGHT MOTORIZED BATTALION

Before they left for training in Italy in December 1941 the volunteers were dressed in uniforms tailored to the standard Croatian *Domobranstvo* pattern, but made up in *grigioverde* cloth provided by the Italian Army along with their weapons and equipment. The ISC provided boots, shoes, shirts, underwear, blankets, and a sleeveless fleece-lined jerkin for each man. Italian equipment included a helmet, backpack, belt, cartridge pouches, bread bag, mess tin and canteen. They were also issued with the Italian *bustina* field cap; initially enlisted ranks wore the 'NHD' badge but later the *fascies* emblem of the MVSN, and uniforms displayed the insignia of the special Blackshirt ranks.³ Like their comrades in the 369th RIR, they displayed their nationality by a Croatian shield, but in this case as a painted aluminium badge worn on the upper left sleeve. On the chest they also wore the Italian-Croatian Legion badge: a blue shield edged in gold, displaying the Italian and Croat colours either side of a gold *fascies* surmounted by an eagle. At the top of the shield was the bilingual title LEGIONE CROATA/ HRVATSKA LEGIJA in gold, and diagonally across the shield in black letters PER L'ITALIA ALALA ('For Italy, ready') and ZA DOM SPREMNI ('For the homeland, ready').

The legionaries' armament included the Mannlicher-Carcano 7.35mm M1891/38 rifle; 9mm Beretta M1918-30, M1938A and 38/42 sub-machine guns; and the 10.35mm M1889/10 revolver and 9mm Beretta M34 pistol. Their heavy weapons comprised 8mm Breda M37 machine guns, 45mm and 81mm M35 mortars, and 47mm M35 47/32 anti-tank guns. Once at the front, the LMB's troops would employ a mixture of regulation

and non-regulation clothing, weapons and equipment of Yugoslavian, Croatian, German, Italian and Soviet origins.

The 2nd Legion was also dressed in Italian Army uniforms, but with Croatian rank insignia as well as the national shield patch. This caused a degree of confusion with some Italian prisoners held at Stockerau while the Croats were training there, so an urgent order was placed for 1,500 Domobran field caps from the ISC in order to differentiate them.

D1: Capomanipolo, Battalion HQ; Ukraine, summer 1942

This is based on a photograph of Zvonimir Parac, who held the MVSN rank equivalent to first lieutenant. Following popular practice, he has painted a Croatian 'chessboard' shield on the right of his Italian M1933 helmet. His uniform is of enlisted-ranks' quality Italian *grigioverde* material but is cut to the ISC *Domobranstvo* pattern. Just visible hanging from the top buttonhole into his left breast pocket is a green plaited whistle-cord. Pinned on that pocket, but more clearly seen in D2, is the badge of the Italian-Croatian Legion. He displays white metal MVSN *fascies* badges on the collar points, and his gold rank insignia on both cuffs. The medal ribbons above his left pocket are those of the Croatian *Brončana kolajna krune kralja Zvonimira s hrastovim grančicama* ('Bronze Medal of King Zvonimir's Crown with Oakleaves') and the Italian *Medaglia di bronzo al Valor Militare* ('Bronze Medal for Military Valour'). He wears non-regulation breeches and riding boots, and his belt and slings support a typical assortment of regulation and non-regulation items including a Royal Yugoslavian Army pouch, a German water bottle and a torch. He is armed with a captured Soviet PPSH-41 sub-machine gun and a holstered 9mm Beretta M34 pistol.

D2: Private, Ukraine, summer 1942

This soldier of the Light Motorized Bn affords a good example of the unit's mixed appearance in Russia. The helmet, the *fascies* MVSN collar badges, the leather equipment, and the weapon – the unpopular M1891/38 rifle, but used here with a German Mauser 98k bayonet – are Italian issue. The tunic is cut to the Croatian *Domobranstvo* pattern but from Italian Army material. (Oddly, a small button has been copied on his left chest; the purpose of this was to hold open the collar as per Italian Army regulations – but the *Domobranstvo* tunic had a closed collar.) Above his left breast pocket is the coloured badge of the Italian-Croatian Legion, as described above. He



The aluminium badge displaying the Croatian national shield, worn on the upper left sleeve by soldiers of the Italian-sponsored Light Motorized Battalion. (Private collection)

³ For general information on the MVSN, including insignia charts, see MAA 340 *The Italian Army 1940–45* (1): *Europe 1940–43*.

is wearing non-regulation breeches and riding boots, probably from his previous service in a *Domobranstvo* cavalry regiment.

D3: Capomanipolo, winter 1941–42

Once again, this is Lt Zvonimir Parac – see D1. His field cap is an Italian *berreto a busta* ('*bustina*') with the gold wreathed *fasces* MVSN officers' badge. Other Italian items include the officer's belt and holstered Beretta pistol. His uniform, including the deep-collared greatcoat, is made of the better-quality and paler officer's *grigioverde* cloth; again, note the *fasces* collar badges. On the left upper sleeve he displays the aluminium shield badge of the Italian-Croatian Legion, and just visible, hanging from his throat to his crowded belt, is a whistle on its green cord.

E: CROATIAN LEGIONARY DIVISIONS

Only the Croatian shield patch, now on the upper right sleeve, distinguished the troops of all three divisions from German units. There were at least four known variants, differing as follows: (a) black backing without lettering; (b) black backing lettered in red HRVATSKA; (c) white backing lettered HRVATSKA; (d) black backing lettered KROATIEN in German. Croat legionaries wore types (b) or (c), and German cadres type (d).

After elements of 373rd Div took part in Operation 'Morning Star' in May 1944, which resulted in the capture of quantities of uniforms, weapons, vehicles and other equipment supplied to the Partisans by the British, the division had a somewhat more mixed appearance.

E1: Legionary, 369th (Croatian) Infantry Division, 1943

This section machine-gunner of the 'Devil's' Division is training during spring 1943, perhaps in readiness for Operation 'Black' in May–June. He wears an M1940 helmet, and an M1940 five-button *Feldbluse* tunic; this is all field-grey including the collar, and the shoulder straps piped in infantry white, but retains the box-pleated pockets with scalloped flaps. Slightly contrasting in colour, and of summer weight, are the trousers from the 1943 *Schilfgrüner Drillich Felddienstanzug* ('reed-green drill cloth field service uniform'). These are confined by canvas anklets copied from the British webbing type, and he has managed to acquire a pair of cleated mountain boots. Here his belt is stripped apart from the spares pouch for the 7.92mm MG34 section machine gun, which is fitted with a feed drum for a 50-round belt.

E2: Legionary, 373rd (Croatian) Infantry Division, 1943

A rifleman from the 'Tiger' Division carrying a Mauser 98k, and dressed almost identically. He has slung his helmet to his belt and wears his M1942 *Feldmütze* with its two-button flap; the trousers are the field-grey woollen M1943 type tapered at the bottom to be worn with ankle boots and canvas gaiters. Apart from the Croatian Legion sleeve shield his insignia are those of any German Army infantryman.

E3: Legionary, 392nd (Croatian) Infantry Division, 1944

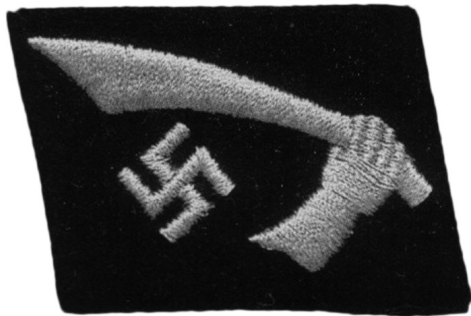
In late summer weather, this conscripted soldier of the 'Blue' Division is wearing the complete cotton drill 1943 *Drillich Felddienstanzug*, with a woollen M1943 *Einheitsfeldmütze* 'universal field cap'. The holstered P08 pistol identifies him as a member of the *Zug* of a crew-served weapon or as a vehicle crewman.

F: 13th SS MOUNTAIN DIVISION 'HANDSCHAR'



A portrait of a *Waffen-Hauptscharführer* (warrant officer) of 13th SS Mtn Div 'Handschar', probably taken in 1944. Note that the woven silver-grey SS eagle-and-swastika above the death's-head badge on his low field-grey *fez* appears to be larger than the small pattern usually worn on field caps; compare it with the example worn on his left arm, above the first-pattern SS national shield. Unusually, his collar patches – with the divisional insignia on his right, and rank insignia on his left – are edged with officer-style silver cord. (Private collection)

The uniform worn by the division was regulation *Waffen-SS* pattern with *Waffen-SS* insignia, including the special ranks used in place of the standard Army sequence, and a divisional right-hand collar patch showing, instead of the SS-runes, the emblem of a hand gripping a scimitar and surrounding a swastika. A Croatian patch with the red-and-white 'chessboard' but lacking the HRVATSKA title across the top of the black backing was worn below the *Waffen-SS* eagle on the left sleeve. Two different shield shapes have been illustrated; one resembles that of the Croatian Legion/369th RIR, while the other has a plainer outline – squared at top and sides, with the bottom nearly semicircular but drawn down into an almost imperceptible central point. As a mountain formation all ranks were entitled to wear the oval, black-backed SS version of the 'Edelweiss' patch on the right



The divisional right collar-patch insignia of the 13. Waffen-Geb Div der SS 'Handschar'. The hand-and-scimitar symbol dated from medieval times in Bosnia, but the SS authorities wrongly believed that the local name for a Turkish curved scimitar was *Handschar*; in fact, the weapon known in Croatian as a *handžar* was a Turkish-Balkan double-edged knife.

sleeve, but in practice this may have been in more limited use.⁴

The division's most obvious uniform difference was its headgear: instead of the field-grey mountain cap the troops wore a black-tasselled *fez*, in field grey for daily duties and dark red for parade and walking-out, which displayed machine-woven SS eagle and death's-head badges. Photos show a few officers, including *SS-Brigaf* Sauberzweig, wearing a smaller, conical field-grey *fez* with the usual badges. Non-Muslim soldiers had the option of wearing the regulation German mountain cap, and were entitled to display the SS-pattern black-backed woven 'Edelweiss' badge on its left side.

As mountain troops, the formation was also issued heavy mountain ankle boots with cleated soles; these were worn either with the trousers simply gathered at the ankle or confined by cloth ankle-puttees, and some cadres were photographed wearing large canvas spat-type 'Styrian' gaiters. From February to summer 1944 the division received issues of both first and second versions of the Waffen-SS *Tarnjacke* or *Tarnhemd* pullover camouflage smock, apparently in 'oak leaf' patterns. Cadres may have acquired various other protective garments, such as the reversible brown/white hooded *Windbluse* anorak (a few examples of an SS-camouflage/white version are also known, but not documented). After summer 1944 some troops received the two-piece *getarnte Drillichanzug* uniform of light drill cloth.

F1: Waffen-Unterscharführer, Feldgendarmerie

This corporal, a Croatian Catholic, serves in the divisional military police platoon SS-Feldgendarmerie Trupp 13, which must have been at least partly mounted – note his breeches and spurred riding boots. He wears a tall, smart, pale field-grey *fez* with woven Waffen-SS eagle and death's-head insignia. His M1936 tunic is tailored with a long-pointed collar, so the divisional patch on his right and the rank patch on his left do not fit neatly in the angles of the NCO *Tresse* silver braid edging. His metal MP's gorget, indicating that he is on duty,

is of standard Wehrmacht pattern, but note the green whistle-cord passing into his right breast pocket. The SS-pattern 'Edelweiss' patch for mountain troops is worn on the right sleeve. Obscured here, high on his left sleeve is a Police wreathed eagle badge in the orange *Waffenfarbe* colour of the Feldgendarmerie (note also the shoulder-strap piping). Immediately below this is an SS-pattern Croatian national shield, and round his left forearm the silver-on-black 'SS-Feldgendarmerie' cuff band.

F2: Waffen-Scharführer, Gebirgsjäger; walking-out dress, summer 1944

For off-duty wear in public he wears the maroon-red version of the *fez*, and a sand-coloured tropical shirt with a black necktie. He is identifiable as a sergeant of *Gebirgsjäger* by his shoulder straps: SS black, edged all round with *Tresse*, and piped in the bright green of this branch of service. The Waffen-SS had its own tropical uniform, which was issued in summer in Southern Europe and Russia. The first pattern was cut like the *feldgrau* uniform but in a pale sand-coloured drill material. This NCO shows the second pattern, with the addition of a shoulder-yoke incorporating breast pocket flaps, which was modelled on Spanish and Italian *Sahariana* jackets. The insignia worn on such jackets varied; this man shows only the SS left sleeve eagle, of the tropical pattern woven in copper-brown on black. The trousers are of the same tapered cut as the M1943 *feldgrau* trousers, with drawstrings and buttoning tabs at the bottom. As with other German uniforms the colour might vary, in this case ranging from a bright sand-yellow to a dark mustard. Note the green cord from his right breast pocket, and the non-issue knife stuck in his belt, which was common among natives of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

F3: Waffen-Unterscharführer, Gebirgsjäger, late 1944

This NCO from Mtn Lt Inf Regt 27 wears a lower, darker field-grey *fez* than F1. He is one of the troops issued with the M1944 *getarnte Drillichanzug*, a two-piece, non-reversible combat uniform intended to replace all previous pullover camouflage smocks. Made initially of herringbone twill, it was cut like the simplified M1943 field-grey *Feldbluse*, with unpleated pockets with straight flaps, and was printed with an all-seasons dotted camouflage nowadays called 'pea pattern'. A subdued green-on-black SS sleeve eagle was manufactured, but some photos show the standard silver-grey type applied. Immediately below this is a single green-on-black rank bar, the lowest in the sequence of black patches bearing green bars and oakleaf shapes produced for use on camouflaged clothing for easy identification of NCOs and officers.

G: GERMAN-CROATIAN POLICE

The original eight-button tunic was based on the pre-war Ordnungspolizei pattern, but in *bleibblau* ('lead-blue' – a greyish colour) rather than German 'Police green'. It had brown collar and cuff facings, piped in bright green *Schützpolizei Truppenfarbe*, and rank was shown on Police shoulder straps; these were made of brown inner and black-flecked silver outer cords, on *Truppenfarbe* underlay.⁵ During 1944 the German-Croatian Police received a large quantity of German M1943-pattern field-grey uniforms, with five- or six-button tunics lacking the brown facings and green piping. Photos suggest that senior ranks had lead-blue uniforms made up in

⁴ For Waffen-SS rank insignia see MAA 401 *The Waffen-SS* (1); 1. to 5. Divisions, and for the SS-pattern Croatian arm shields see MAA 415, *The Waffen-SS* (3): 11. to 23. Divisions.

For mountain troops insignia, see Elite 63, *German Mountain & Ski Troops 1939–45*.

⁵ For details of Police insignia, see MAA 434 *World War II German Police Units*

this pattern. German Police metal insignia were worn on the officers' and enlisted ranks' peaked service caps; woven versions on the sidecap and M1943 peaked field cap; and woven Police wreathed eagle badges on the left upper sleeve, in Schützpolizei-green or silver-grey.

G1: Hauptmann der Schützpolizei, late 1944

His 'lead-blue' service cap has a brown band, green Schützpolizei piping, German national cockade, Police wreathed eagle badge in white metal, and silver cap cords. The five-button tunic of the same colour is unfaced and unpiped, and worn opened at the collar over a grey shirt and black tie; the officers' silver collar *Litzen* are embroidered on Schützpolizei-green patches. The German Police eagle badge on his left upper sleeve is in officers' silver-grey, with the swastika, as always, in black. It was only in October 1944 that a Croatian 'chessboard' patch was introduced, being worn thereafter on the left forearm of tunics and greatcoats. It was smaller than the legionary type, of plain 'heater' shape, showing a narrow black backing without lettering. This captain has been decorated with the Iron Cross 2nd Class, and also sports the chest ribbon of the *Srebrna kolajna krune kralja Zvonimira s hrastovim grančicama* ('Silver Medal of King Zvonimir's Crown, with Oakleaves').

G2: Schützpolizist, late 1944

The German M1943 uniform was in field-grey (late batches of shoddy quality sometimes had a brownish-grey cast). The two-button flap of his M1943 field cap almost hides the woven German Police wreathed eagle badge below the national cockade on the front. In the late stage of the war many policemen preferred to wear German camouflage smocks of various types rather than their winter greatcoats; this example is a hooded, second-model German Army pullover smock in 'splinter' pattern. His belt, with the Police swastika buckle plate, supports a holstered P08 on his hip. The tapered M1943 trousers are gathered over his boots with woollen socks and ankle-puttees.

G3: Oberwachmeister, early 1945

This *Feldwebel*-equivalent NCO, trying out a new Sturmgewehr 44 assault rifle, displays two noteworthy uniform features: an officer-quality Police sleeve badge in silver-grey, and breeches with riding boots. Horses were practical for anti-Partisan operations in the rugged mountain country of Croatia.

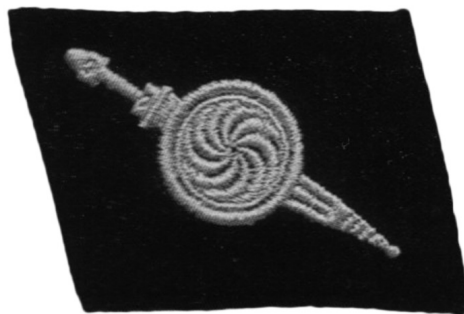
H: MISCELLANEOUS UNIFORMS

H1: Waffen-Gebirgsjäger, 23rd SS Mountain Division 'Kama'; Hungary, 1944

This soldier during training is wearing summer barracks dress: a field-grey *fez*; a light *feldgrau* shirt with detachable black shoulder straps piped in the green *Waffenfarbe* of mountain light infantry; *feldgrau* Waffen-SS M1944 straight trousers; a black leather belt with the Waffen-SS buckle; and brown mountain boots. Troops transferred from the 'Handschar' Div kept their existing SS uniforms, while new recruits received Army uniforms of late-war patterns.

H2: Feldwebel, 22nd Anti-Aircraft Division; Germany, autumn 1944

This sergeant-major of the Croatian Anti-Aircraft Legion serving with Heavy AA Detachment 463 is dressed in the Luftwaffe *Fliegermütze* and *Fliegerbluse* that served as both working and off-duty uniform. On duty in a gun position he would normally wear a helmet, belt and boots, but not all photos show these. His collar patches and the piping to his shoulder straps are in red artillery *Waffenfarbe*, and his Croatian nationality is indicated by the woven Croatian Air Force Legion 'wings' on his left sleeve.



This divisional collar-patch emblem for the 23rd SS Mtn Div 'Kama' has been illustrated, showing a sun-disc superimposed over a diagonal knife shaped like a Caucasian *kindjal*, but there is no photographic evidence for its wartime manufacture or use.

H3: Volunteer, Banda 2, MVAC; Croatia, winter 1942-43

Affiliated to the Italian 158o *Divisione 'Zara'* headquartered at Zadar in November 1942, these MVAC volunteers initially wore their civilian clothes, but soon received both summer and winter Italian uniforms; in winter they wore white woollen socks or *Obojci* (wrapped foot-cloths). The headgear was sometimes a black beret, but usually the Dalmatian peasant's traditional *calota* pillbox cap, with a red top for Croats or orange for Serbs. The cap had a black tie-on band with hanging ends at the back, which was adorned with the badge of the Italian Arditi: a white-metal skull with a knife in its teeth, here on a green (centre)-white-red Italian national cockade. The uniform worn is still debated – some claim it to have been Royal Yugoslavian Army olive-grey, others a greenish-khaki, and some a dark brown – but from the few available photos it seems to have been of Italian Army cut but in a very dark shade of grey-green. Some personnel wore metal *fascas* collar badges. He wears an Italian grey-green leather belt and neck strap, but the cartridge pouch is for his old 7.92mm Yugoslavian Mauser M24 rifle and bayonet; Breda or OTO M35 hand grenades were also standard issue. NCOs were armed with the 9mm Beretta M1938A sub-machine gun, and officers carried the 9mm Beretta M34 pistol or 10.35mm Bodeo M1889/10 revolver.

Italian officers wore their regulation uniforms and rank insignia, but local members of the MVAC had their own rank distinctions: coloured triangles, some with metal stars, which were worn on the forward left side of the cap and/or in the centre of a light blue armband worn around the left upper sleeve. (An example of this armband is illustrated in MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940-45* (1): *Europe 1940-43*, on Plate G3.) The sequence, from battalion commander down to deputy squad leader, was: *capo battaglione* – gold triangle & star; *vice capo battaglione* – gold triangle; *capo compagnia* – silver triangle & star; *vice capo compagnia* – silver triangle; *capo plotone* – orange-yellow triangle & star; *vice capo plotone* – orange-yellow triangle; *caposquadra* – red triangle & star; *vice caposquadra* – red triangle. The stars were 'pyramid'-shaped like the Savoy stars on the collars of Royal Italian Army uniforms. On some armbands the name of the unit's garrison was printed in black to the left of the triangle and that of the commander to the right. All armbands were stamped with the authenticating seal of the Italian division to which the unit was attached.

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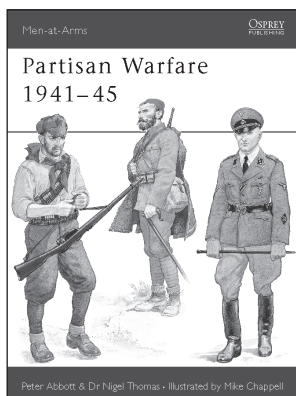
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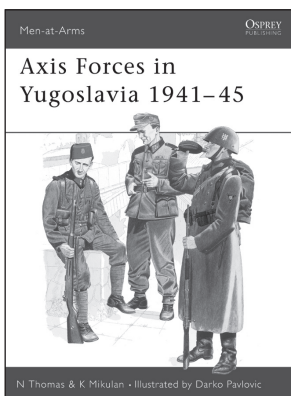
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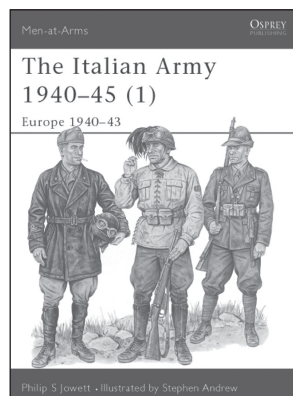
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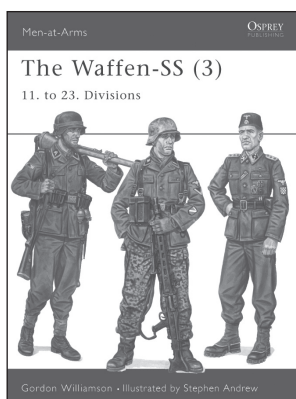
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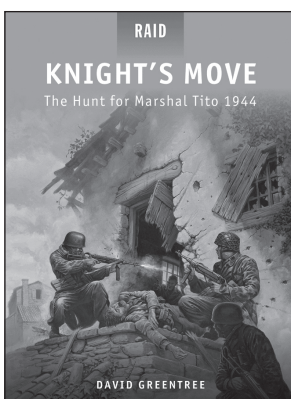
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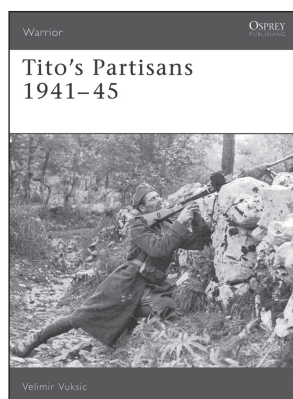
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